

## BOOK REVIEW

### Poignant encounters in medical practice

OLINDA TIMMS

**Upreet Dhaliwal, *InVerse Medicine – Poems about things often left unsaid*, Self-published, 98 pgs, Rs 299 (paperback), ISBN: 978-93-5445-603-9**

It is true that setting and context enhance one's enjoyment of poetry. This book was fittingly released during the pandemic, when health workers are completely wrung out, leaving behind nothing but heaving emotions. Yet that is not the only reason that one can connect so completely with Dr. Upreet's collection of poems.

*InVerse Medicine* delights even as it devastates, recalling poignant encounters and humane moments in the practice of medicine. It is a compilation of poems written at different points in the author's life, coming together seamlessly as a highly readable and evocative collection. The book is the result of a Humanities residency programme at the Institute of Bioethics and Health Humanities in Galveston, Texas, in 2019. A self-professed storyteller and poet, Dr Upreet is a former Professor of Ophthalmology and co-founder of the Health Humanities Group at the University College of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. Her efforts led to the establishment of the open-access, peer-reviewed online Medical Humanities journal, *Research and Humanities in Medical Education (RHIME)* that she leads as Editor. The acronym is not accidental, and the journal publishes poetry in addition to other literary and art-based works contributed by doctors and medical students.

These poems have a direct and easy style that lends itself to reading, capturing the silences between the lines and drawing in the reader early in the narration. The settings are familiar to any practitioner: the ward, the ICU and clinic. The gaze moves from doctor to patient, from mother to child, the

dying to the living. One can so easily identify with the setting and the emotions that have surely been experienced by health workers at one time or the other. There are questions whose answers are just out of one's grasp, and some that remain ever unanswered. The author never hesitates to highlight ethical dilemmas that permeate the pleasure and pain of medical practice, as well as the dark places where doctors plunge into despair.

The first poem bravely shares a private moment of loss, while subsequent ones encounter other relationships, human and broken. 'Triage', 'Let me go' and 'Dear Intensive Care Provider' acquire new meaning in the context of the pandemic. Social issues of gender and patriarchy are sensitively portrayed in 'You and me', 'Misplaced Injustice' and 'Hey Miss...' Other noteworthy poems dwell on end-of-life themes, and letting go.

Doctors have used poetry as a medium of expression for centuries. In fact, John Keats abandoned a career in medicine to work on writing. William Carlos Williams was a paediatrician and general practitioner who won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry posthumously, in 1963. It is still unclear whether it is the emotional catharsis of poems that fulfils a professional need, or the depth of human experience in medicine that evokes poetic writing. Either way, there appears to be a natural affinity. The inclusion of the Humanities in medical education provides a space for exploration of this art form in a pressured scientific environment. As evidenced, residencies can provide a much-needed time for renewal and holistic exploration of other creative dimensions of the medical professional that can contribute richly to the wider body of art and literature. Dr Upreet's well-crafted poems are refreshing and renewing; reminiscent of real events, while reminding us again of what we can be.

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