The sin eater

Doctors often see patients at their worst, but there’s a silver lining to witnessing pain • BY DR. MELISSA YUAN-INNES

I wrestled with the idea of myself as a village sin eater. . . . Finally, I made my peace with it by deciding, ‘Well, sins are interesting.’

It’s worth it

Seven years later, when I was on my trauma rotation, I ended up treating both partners from a violent domestic situation where a good Samaritan was killed. I opened my first rape kit after I graduated. Since then, I’ve had many interesting experiences. I had one patient almost kill two police officers. I’ve called the Children’s Aid Society numerous times. I’ve removed a bullet from a teenager’s leg and pulled a rock out of a child’s ear.

But mostly, I have worked so many shifts I’ve been left sick three different times within three weeks, sleepless even when I was off work and dreaming about patients when I did get to sleep. Sometimes patients swear at me or vomit on me. The staff get short-tempered. The government seems intent on insulting us and bankrupting us. But what I worry about the most are my own sins: that I didn’t know enough, that I didn’t work fast enough, that I inadvertently harmed one of my patients.

Looking back, I would tell my earnest 21-year-old med school-applying self that doctors are, indeed, sin eaters. Not that we’re literally eating food off patients’ bodies, but that we see the sins of our patients that many overlook, and that is how we pay the rent. We study to the point of exhaustion and work inhumane hours for the privilege of seeing the worst of human nature. When other people shy away, we’re the ones who tend to plague victims or fly to earthquake sites.

On the upside, we also witness the best of human nature. One of my med school classmates spent his single day off each week volunteering on an organic farm. I cried after I delivered my first baby, and the mother hugged me. Sure, we may eat seven deadly sins every day, but we also dine on the seven heavenly virtues, which not only pay the rent, but feed the soul. So if I’m a sin eater, I’m also a virtue eater, and most days, it’s worth it.

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