The sin eater

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

In 18th and 19th century Wales, when someone was about to die, his or her family would summon the village sin eater, a poor, isolated individual hungry for any sort of meal. The family would place a crust of bread on the dying person’s breast and pass a jug of beer over it as well. The sin eater would consume the bread and drink the beer and, in so doing, accept the dying person’s sins, so that the deceased could ascend to heaven instead of becoming a wandering spirit.

“At least that way, someone got a square meal out of it,” observed the psychiatrist in Margaret Atwood’s short story, “The Sin Eater.” I read this tale as part of my literature course with Dr. Jean Wilson (PhD) at McMaster University, while completing my bachelor of arts and science. However, I was very disturbed when the psychiatrist in the story compared doctors to sin eaters.

Here I was, applying to medical school and earnestly writing essays about how I was intent on helping others. I knew I wanted to work with people because I found them curious and interesting, in a career that was intellectually challenging but would also garner respect and remuneration (this was before the most draconian Ontario pay cuts, of course). I knew that I wanted to save lives, and be able to go to sleep at night assured that I’d worked hard and achieved meaningful results.

But I had to wonder: Why did Atwood’s psychiatrist consider himself a sin eater? Sin eaters were beggars, summoned only when their services were necessary. They were shunned in public and considered increasingly depraved with each meal. They were eviscerated by the church, which wanted to reserve the last rites for itself.

That sort of contempt, insecurity and poverty was exactly what I was trying to avoid. Deep down, I wanted to become a writer, but I also wanted a roof over my head. So I was doubly appalled to hear that my future high-falutin’ medical career might be the equivalent of swallowing other people’s sins. The idea repulsed me, but I could see the truth in it. Doctors go to war.

Doctors are the ones who decide if a child died from abuse. Doctors see rape victims, drug addicts and murderers.

For two days, I put aside my med school application. I wrestled with the idea of myself as a village sin eater. An outcast. Poor. Used and cast aside. Finally, I made my peace with it by deciding, “Well, sins are interesting.” The truth is, I was curious about all those terrible things. If I could witness them and provide compassionate and skilful care, well, I’d have a lot more stories to write.

‘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 gets 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-applyling 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 inhuman hours for the privilege of seeing the worst of human nature.

When other people say 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.

Dr. Melissa Yuan-Innes is an ED physician in Ottawa and Alexandria, Ont.