The sanctity of life

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I was woken from sleep by my father at the door.

A simple question: 'Are you coming?'

I was a second-year medical student and it was a precious Sunday morning, a rare chance to sleep in amongst heavy contact hours, study and my casual work as a nurse's aid at an aged care home. The sun was rising with the promise of a perfect day. The pull of new experience, aided by youth, lured me up; a quick breakfast and out to the car.

Dad was a pathologist. He was the director of histopathology at a major public hospital and he did forensic autopsies on weekends, usually sudden deaths over the previous 24 hours. I had been accompanying him for a few weeks in this endeavour, and it had so far been a fascinating experience that I felt very privileged to have. I was in awe of my dad and saw him in a new light. I and my three siblings were lucky. He was a loving father who, along with my mother, had treated us to good schools, trips around the world and a comfortable home. He worked three jobs while mum looked after everything else. We had a sheltered life but also had grown up with autopsy reports and pictures carelessly placed on his desk, pots containing who knows what kicking around the car and whispers of high-profile cases we saw on the news.

At the coroner's office on a weekend Dad ran the show, while technicians did the cutting and weighing. The whole office was so friendly and welcoming to me, an imposter, a newbie and as green as grass, out of my depth. The bodies were treated with great respect but at the same time there was an atmosphere of work, efficiency, what's next, and let's complete the job as best we can. Thorough examination of a body externally came first, followed by opening the chest and abdomen and inspecting each organ, weighing and scrutinising. Then came a cut through the skull with a circular saw and examination of the brain. Lastly, samples were collected and sent for toxicology, blood and stomach contents. Dad dictated details about each step into a cassette recorder.

Initially it was confronting seeing these people lifeless on the slab. They had been alive the day before and this was almost unbelievable. Little did they know their fate. Over the previous weeks I'd seen the frothy airway of a perfect little two-year-old boy who had drowned in a backyard pool, such sadness for the family lingering in the air. I had witnessed the gluggy soup of undigested pills ladled from the stomach of a young woman with blue hair, long dark roots and chipped nail polish, a stark reflection of her sadness and suicide. Another was the ultimately declared suicide of a young man with rough rope burns and bruising of his neck coupled with a congested and swollen face. A life wasted. There were several victims of motor vehicle accidents. One woman had horrific head injuries only,

leaving her body unscathed: she was the passenger on a motorbike that collided with a truck. Another man had an untouched head but internal injuries incompatible with life.

It became apparent to me that everyone is the same inside: the fat layer, the muscles and bones, the alignment of organs, the contours of the brain. We are all vulnerable and the thread between life and death is thin. It was eye opening for me, a young medical student barely twenty years old. One of my father's colleagues, a fellow pathologist, once took me into an adjacent room to view a decomposing body, a murder victim. I never knew the story but the stench was overwhelming. Laid out before me was a skeleton, a jumble of bones with patchy flesh attached. This had been a person with hopes and dreams. I was numb.

Despite these tragic tales, on this sunny Sunday I would be affected more than by the others. I don't really know why because it was a less graphically confronting case. The sight of the young fourteen-year-old boy lying there on the slab, naked, was striking and shocking. He and a friend had taken a gun from the family home and his mate had accidentally shot him. This may be a common story these days in America but it was unusual in small town Adelaide in the '90s.

I saw a perfectly proportioned body, long lean limbs and adult-like muscles, yet still so childlike in that adolescent way. His skin was pale and flawless and his eyes were closed as though he was asleep. Are we sure he's not asleep? I felt myself look very closely. One blemish gave it away, a single bullet hole on his left chest; no blood, just a small red wound. I couldn't stop thinking about his parents and their grief and the futility of the situation, yet it was I here with him, a stranger, witnessing this analysis and discovering the truth of what happened. It seemed so unfair to his loved ones.

The CT scanner showed that the bullet went through his aorta and wedged in the spine. That was all it took to take the life out of this boy, just beginning his life. There was no disfigurement or gore. I wonder if that is why he affected me so much; it made it unfathomable, the unfairness of it, the 'what ifs' that could have prevented his death. The boys could have decided to ride bikes or watch TV and there was always the chance the bullet could have missed or run a non-fatal path.

I was glad the doctors that day didn't cut him open or flay his chest or remove his brain to determine the cause of death. It would have seemed wrong and somehow more brutal and savage. I thought about that young boy frequently for weeks afterwards, or was it months? His presence remained. I would think about him when I went to sleep or when I saw a teenage boy on the street. He has entered my thoughts many times since over the decades that have passed. He has helped me to contemplate death and its close relationship to life, a reminder to cherish every moment and to keep my family safe. He influenced my choice to study an elective subject called 'Death, dying, loss and grief'.

My husband and I have three sons, all of which have now thankfully passed their fourteenth year, a milestone I was irrationally nervous about for each of them.

I kept attending the coroner's office with my dad on the weekends for a few more months after that. I was honoured to stand by each and every story of a life lived and an ultimately

unexpected death. It really struck me that the world kept turning and life continued despite the fact these mostly young lives had ceased to exist. I could feel the tragedies and the weight of grief felt by the loved ones lingering in the air, even though I had never met them. Life is precious and should be cherished. In saying that, it's that innocent teenager who is the one that has stayed with me over the years. That young boy changed my life.

The whole experience was a turning point that shaped my attitudes to medicine and the sanctity of life. It contributed to my special interest in paediatrics and palliative care, the extremes. I love treating the young with all their promise but feel equally privileged to help patients of all ages have a good death. I think the experience has given me a deeper compassion for the variety of personalities I have met over my career, and I am so grateful to my father – my teacher and my mentor – who led me into the health profession and exposed me to these valuable life lessons.

We are truly all the same physically, no matter our ethnicity, gender, age or sexuality. The cycle of our lives may vary in content and length but whatever the story, it always starts with birth and ends with death.