

## ■ NARRATIVE MEDICINE

This is a story and illustration from the upcoming book *100 Little Stories of Big Moments* published by The Permanente Press.

Most of the stories and poems were written by clinicians in 15 minutes in writing workshops about meaningful moments in their work and life of practicing medicine. Professional artists were asked to create a visual representation of the story.

# The Wise One

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"Have you ever made a mistake?" I asked the Wise One, the one whom all the patients love. The Wise One is the "best doctor in town," the experienced one, the one with gray hairs. The Wise One has monthly meetings with Rachel Naomi Remen, the guru of the art of healing.

"Yes," said the Wise One. "I made a mistake once." He bowed his head a little in—was it shame? "I remember it well," he said. "It was years ago. A baby who was constipated. It took me 2 months to do the blood test—the baby had hypothyroidism. The parents

blamed me for missing the diagnosis."

Once? I thought. Though I was in the early years of my career, 2 or 3 years out of residency, I counted the mistakes I had made in the hundreds. Little ones, inconsequential. Near misses—whew, got lucky on that one. And then the big one. I was accused of having delayed the diagnosis of a serious illness in a child. I was devastated. The parents "fired" me. There was a threatened lawsuit, a meeting with "risk management," a cordial and professional Q&A meeting.

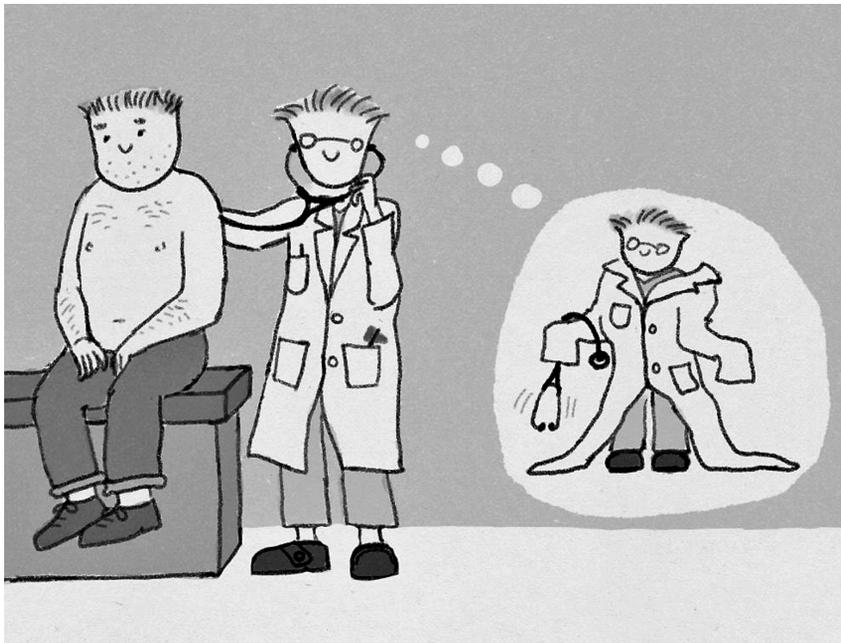
It was deemed by the group (all pediatricians, much too nice) that there was no fault, it could have happened to anyone, but perhaps there was "some room for learning." The family couldn't find any expert witnesses and dropped the case. But I still didn't have any way of knowing whether I had erred. It was too complex, hindsight a blinding light which had already rendered it impossible to look with objectivity on the way the case had played out.

And now, what to do with this? "I made a mistake once," the Wise One said.

If I'm the only one who makes so many mistakes, should I really be here?

But yet here I am, clocking in and clocking out every day. Nobody knows (do they?) that I might not be worthy of the power that I have been given through my medical degree.

Am I the only one who feels this way? ❖



Accompanying artwork:  
**The Imposter**  
by Caroline Shoener

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