

**POETRY AND MEDICINE**



**Touched**

*Are the days of the personal physician numbered? Will the patient of the future simply type in his complaints, submit his blood to an analytic chip and expose his organs to ultrasound and X-ray? Will his diagnosis and treatment be delivered by machine or the machine's human mouthpiece? Perhaps. Driven by "efficiency," drive-through-super-high-tech medicine will be one possible tomorrow. But the variety show of human experiences — only some of which we construe as symptoms — will likely defy satisfying computerized analysis. And the innate need for connection will not go away, particularly when pain and dread are involved.*

In this day of brassy press releases  
Touting nuclear scans and gene sequencing,  
There remains an ancient, quiet communion  
Between doctors and patients.  
In an act part ritual and part practical,  
They unclthe themselves as before no one else  
And we touch them. We lay our hands on their  
Bodies: trembling, tender, blistered, broken.  
Defenseless and confessional, they speak  
The vulnerable truth on the other side of nakedness.

Here's how I explain it to the medical students:  
Not cold-blooded like a thief checking for doors ajar  
Not hot-blooded like a lover seeking to excite  
But warm-blooded, like a grandmother checking the cheek  
Of her youngest grandchild for fever and fear.

The examining hands do more than probe  
On behalf of the inquisitive brain.  
As bridges between two human souls  
They send as well as receive.  
While the right hand is feeling for the liver's edge  
The left hand is on the patient's shoulder  
Closing a circuit of reassurance & safety.  
Without fanfare or even conscious awareness  
The patient feels not just *examined*  
But also *touched*.

— Daniel Bressler, MD, FACP



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