

# NUS student's poem about cancer patient bags top prize from journal

23-year-old is first undergrad to get the award from esteemed medical publication

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Inspired by an encounter with an elderly patient with colorectal cancer, medical student Faye Ng wrote a poem musing about the taciturn man and the stories behind his scars.

Last month, her piece, *A Pink Crease*, won the top poetry prize handed out by one of the world's most widely cited medical journals.

She is the first undergraduate to receive the award, which is given to the best poem published in *Annals of Internal Medicine* each year.

The medical journal is one of several that devote space to reflective writing and poems usually by physicians.

Ms Ng, 23, a fourth-year undergraduate at the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, penned the poem several months after meeting the elderly man in the general surgery ward during her posting at a hospital for surgical training in 2020.

The man, in his 70s, had late-stage colorectal cancer, and the disease had spread to other parts of his body.

"He was always very sullen and reticent and didn't really want to talk to doctors. I tried to befriend him and I was curious to know



Ms Faye Ng, a fourth-year undergraduate at the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, penned the award-winning poem several months after meeting an elderly patient with colorectal cancer in the general surgery ward during her posting at a hospital in 2020. PHOTO: COURTESY OF FAYE NG

more about his condition," Ms Ng recalled.

"One day, he opened up a bit to me and showed me some of his scars from previous operations."

Impacted by her conversations with him, she wrote the poem and submitted it to the journal in May last year, after some encouragement from a mentor.

She was happy enough to see it published in November, so clinching a prize was a pleasant bonus.

She does not know what happened to the man after she completed her posting, as medical students do not usually stay in touch with patients.

Ms Ng, whose parents are teachers, will be donating the US\$500 (S\$680) prize to the National University Hospital (NUH) Children's Fund, which supports needy patients of the Khoo Teck Puat – National University Children's Medical Institute at NUH.

She said she started writing poetry in secondary school, after a friend in her school's humanities

programme introduced her to the field.

As a science student who planned to read medicine, she pursued her interest in poetry on the sidelines through the Ministry of Education's Creative Arts Programme, a week-long intensive writing seminar for budding writers.

She was also mentored by local writer Desmond Kon and later attended Sing Lit Station's Manuscript Bootcamp twice while in medical school.

"I write in bursts... If I feel inspired by something, if I feel like something needs to be said, then I'll write," said Ms Ng, who hopes to compile her best works in a manuscript collection.

She likens her poems to "glass jars" in which she keeps some of the most memorable experiences in her life.

Her interest in medical-themed poetry grew in university, and she took reference from physician writers such as the late British neurolo-

gist Oliver Sacks, the late Sir William Osler, a Canadian physician, and the late American neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi, who battled lung cancer.

She also enjoys reading works by American poets Sharon Olds and Ada Limon, among others.

In a statement, Dr Michael LaCombe, an associate editor at *Annals of Internal Medicine* and editor of its poetry section, said Ms Ng's poem was deemed by the judges the "overwhelming favourite" among all poems the journal published last year.

"Considering the impressive volume of poetry submissions we receive each year, just being selected to be published is an honour," he said.

"To stand out among the elite that make publication is a triumph."

Ms Ng, whose poem was picked out from 23 published in the journal last year, said writing helps her reflect on the practice of medicine.

"Medicine is all about healing. But a lot of it, like surgery, is also

very violent. Of course it's done to improve patients' health, but it can be very traumatic," she said.

"For that patient I met, the surgery was possibly curative, but in a sense it also marked him forever.

"So, I was just thinking a bit more about what the scars meant, the physical imprints that we collect as we move through life."

Ms Ng, who will be graduating from medical school next year, added: "A lot of times it's very easy to be overwhelmed by medical facts and get so caught up with the details and getting the treatment right that we forget the patient behind the sickness.

"In medicine, you can see so much of the struggles of humanity and you think a lot about what it means to be alive, what it means to be human."

Ms Ng's poem can be found here: <https://www.acpjournals.org/doi/10.7326/M21-2263>

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