

History of Present Illness

By Sophie L. Schott

“Not everyone
is emotionally able
to care
for patients with AIDS.”

- *The American Medical Association, 1986*

Haitians, hemophiliacs,
homosexuals, heroin addicts.

thus begins this
history of present illness:

bigotry and bravery, both
writ in blood, bluish blooms

when Kaposi’s colors made
men others, medicine moral,

doctoring danger,
and duty a debate

predicated care on physician
preference, an emotional state

for, “not everyone is able to
care for patients with AIDS.”

this virus sounds inside us,
an aubade without an audience

unwinding as helices
at the dawn of twin fates:

reckon with transgressions or
reiterate illness, repeat history.

remember broken Hippocratic
promises, and repeat after me:

*“To do no harm, above all,
I must not play God.”*

At the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic, articles in mainstream medical journals and lay literature contended that some clinicians—particularly those classified as high-risk—might be exempt from “the duty to treat” patients with COVID-19. The therapeutic attitudes and profound fear expressed in some of these articles echoed similar attitudes and fears emergent in a previous public health disaster: HIV/AIDS.

History of Present Illness probes at the resonance of this past in contemporary rehabilitation medicine. Acknowledging the bigotry and bravery of those who came before us is not only an essential aspect of healing for individual patients who come from historically underserved and marginalized communities, but also a necessary requisite for the rehabilitation of medicine as an institution steeped in histories of exclusion, racism, and injustice. As rehabilitation professionals, clinicians, students, and caregivers, we must reckon with past transgressions in our profession or risk relapse into a system that predicates care on clinician preference rather than the intrinsic human worth of each patient that we partner with in the healing process.

About the Author



Sophie L. Schott is a poet, ethicist, and researcher at UT Austin. Her writing probes at the multidimensional meaning of her academic pursuits and explores how the humanities might ameliorate some of the indelicacies of illness and human suffering. After completing her undergraduate medical education, Schott aspires to pursue a career as a physician-poet and clinical ethicist.