

## Poem

---

### Stethoscope

She has wandered with me  
since my first days as a physician—  
an unassuming extension of my ears,  
gently slung about a tattered collar,  
patiently transmitting rubs, rhonchi, rales,  
as I struggled to decipher them.

She has sealed herself against unfamiliar skins—  
wrinkled, jaundiced, tattooed, inflamed—  
to magnify each breath sound and heartbeat  
of my patients.

I have squeezed her to the point of suffocation  
between my trembling hands.  
I have let her venture into the territory of blood-stained garments  
while I maintain a safe distance.  
I have dropped her to the cold, hard tiles  
in moments of crisis.

She has, with loving grace,  
been present for diagnoses  
that struck me to the bone:  
tamponade,  
heart attack,  
pneumothorax.

Her bell was the first to transmit the vibrant thump  
of a newborn's heartbeat,  
and her diaphragm the last to touch the breast  
of a dying mother.

She and I have united  
to triumph over the x-ray machine,  
to discover a heart murmur,  
to distinguish pneumonia from pulmonary edema,  
to comfort the distressed with a healing touch.

In the austere halls of this hospital,  
she has listened to my own heart pound  
over 100 million times,  
brushing aside those skipped beats,  
my moments of self-doubt.

#### Anne K Merritt

**Correspondence to** Anne Merritt, 757 Orange St #3, New Haven, CT 06511, USA; [akmerritt@gmail.com](mailto:akmerritt@gmail.com)

**Competing interests** None.

**Provenance and peer review** Not commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

Published Online First 16 February 2011

*J Med Ethics; Medical Humanities* 2011;**37**:57. doi:10.1136/jmh.2010.005520