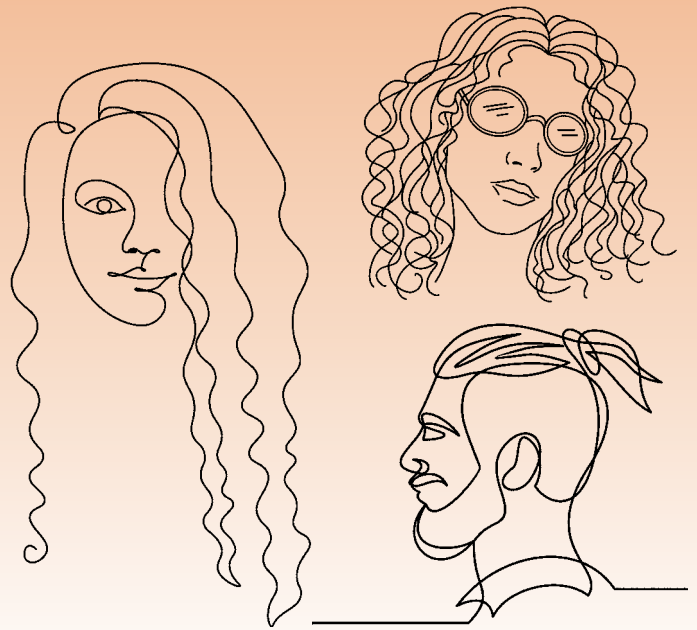


Hair and its stories



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I don't think medical school gives enough weight to hair, and why would it? We have these follicles that we cut without much forethought. It calls the largest organ in the body its home, an organ known by some for its financial potential and by others for its potential as a canvas of creativity. But the hair so often gets overlooked.

As medical students we learn hair in the context of layers, and sweat and oils, and nerve endings, but we spend just as much time thinking about the structures that fill the space around the hair as we do thinking about hair itself. Mnemonics abound to help us remember that Pacinian was a fan of pressure, or that Meissner likes to hide within the dermal papillae, but a year and a half in, and I couldn't tell you the first thing about how hair grows, or changes over time. The thing about hair they don't teach us in medical school is that hair tells stories.

Amy

Amy was a 35-year-old mother of three when she found out her body had betrayed her. They called it cancer on the phone, as if that was a word she could understand, as if the phone wire could somehow dampen the blow of that two-syllable monster. She cried and she did what the doctor said. She met with doctors she hadn't even realized existed, who knew how to shoot her with radiation beams without the Marie Curie side effects. She cried for them, with them. And she cried for her children. But she pushed on.

She told them they could take her breasts, she didn't want them anymore, but they told her less was more these days, that the poison was just as important as the knife, and that a smaller surgery wouldn't delay her chemo. She told them that made sense, but nothing made any sense at all.

They cut the lump out (lumpectomy sounds so much nicer than it really is) and they told her it was aggressive and that she'd need more "rounds" than any of the many women she had talked to, women who claimed to understand her but who could never really understand her. She already felt like such a punching bag that she couldn't imagine the harm of a few more rounds until she realized that "rounds" also sounded so much nicer than it really was. Doctor's rarely stop to think about how bad nausea can be. Doctor's also never tell you that your three-year-old daughter can't exactly be entertained or cared for by a mother who needs 25 hours of sleep a day, and that aggressive treatment does nothing to cure your nine-year-old's crippling separation anxiety that reared its ugly head at the thought of his mom having cancer.

Doctors do tell you that you're going to lose your hair.

When Amy started losing her hair, on a cold night in mid-October, she wept tears of joy because cancer treatment is like being a cog in a never-ending machine, where doctors really do do their best to explain to patients what is happening, but patients can only bring themselves to hear so much. And, everyone assumes, does not ask, about the hair.

Amy didn't feel attached to her hair, just like she didn't feel attached to her breasts. She felt attached to her kids, to her family, to her life, so when she saw clumps of hair on the floor, she saw for the first time, that whatever this crazy medical complex was doing to her, it was working. It

was doing something. If it was getting her hair, she hoped to God it was getting her cancer, too. And so, sometimes, hair tells a story of hope.

Julie

Julie was 22-years-old when it happened. She was weeks from starting law school, and she was out with friends who were moving to various places at varying amounts of “soon.” It doesn’t matter what she was wearing, or how much she was drinking. Julie was raped, not by an aggressive stranger, but by one of her close friends. The details were fuzzy, the experience fuzzier. She remembers a lot of “No,” and one too many, “come ons,” and then it was over. She woke up the next morning feeling uneasy but not broken. One in four, they say. She got up quickly, nauseously, and vomited in his toilet.

She never told her friends. She never told her mom, even though she’d made a promise in college that she would. It seemed both insignificant and also like the most significant thing that had ever happened to her, but she tried to bury it. He was moving a plane ride away. That distance should keep the demons out.

She started law school and things were hard, but reasonably so. And then came the incident in the library at 3 a.m., before her first exam that she chalked up to too much caffeine and not enough sleep. She couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t speak, and she couldn’t see, and then it was over. Thirty minutes later, but it was over. She went to bed and passed her test, and thought almost nothing of it. Until the incident at 4 p.m. the next Sunday, eating a late brunch with friends from home, when someone said his name for the first time since it happened. She felt as though she needed to crawl out of her skin because her lungs might burst. She couldn’t take in air fast enough, and couldn’t get it out fast enough. She could barely say, “please no hospital,” before she slumped, crippled by the panic, the anxiety, the fear, and the hate. And then it passed and she was back, and she knew that it had nothing to do with law school stress, but she blamed it on that. She paid for brunch, went home and cried, alone. She cried hard for the first time, and then tried to pick herself back up, knowing all too well that demons don’t like to stay buried, no matter how deep the hole.

She looked in the mirror and noticed it. She brushed her hair and then looked at the brush and realized that she’d missed the signs. The second work order for the clogged drain that she chalked up to her roommates’ laziness and hygiene. That lint roller she impulsively purchased even though she doesn’t own a cat.

The doctors call it *telogen effluvium*. Telogen, for the hair, and effluvium, an “invisible emanation.” The guidelines tell doctors to offer their support, and that maybe the hair will grow back. So much of what we come with is rigid, and so much of medicine is focused on restoring that rigidity by putting the pieces back in place, that sometimes, we miss the bigger picture. They say that water has memory, but it’s hair that tells stories.

Jesse

I started growing a beard when I was about 11-years-old. Something about hormones in the milk, or the water, or the chicken. They say that girls who go through puberty early are at a social disadvantage, and boys just the opposite. But when you’re 11-years-old and you start to look 18-years-old and feel eight-years-old, and your abdominal hair feels like an unwanted forest, social advantage is just about the last thing that comes to mind. So, I tried to shave it off. But I missed some lessons that people must learn sometime between being a kid and being an adult about how razors work.

First lesson: when you shave your hair, especially on your face, it’s sort of like cutting off the tips of weeds, without killing the root. It comes back stronger, harder, faster. It plays games with you, taunts you, and tricks you. Peach fuzz becomes fur, and there’s literally nothing that can be done about it. Second lesson: I had no idea what I was doing when it came to this thing that appeared on my face, and I knew less about the art of getting rid of it. What I had was my dad’s razor and an uncanny aversion to shaving cream. So I would shave with whatever grain felt right, without shaving cream, and without telling anybody. One day it stopped working. The razor was clogged, filled with hair I never wanted. Being the adventitious and resourceful 12-year-old I was, I decided I would clear the hair from the five sharp razor blades with my bare finger. I probably don’t have to explain the bleeding, or the pain, or the fact that five blades means at least five layers of skin stripped in an instant.

Hair tells stories about people. Its presence and its absence, and the holes and scars and gaps it leaves along the way are a road map to the experiences that fill people’s lives. Doctors are in the business of understanding how people work, so that they can either maintain the status quo or get people back to where they were. So, why does medical education so often neglect hair and the many stories it has to tell?

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