

Even today as I ponder the beginning stages of the war, it feels too surreal to be true. My naive thoughts are still fresh in my mind, "This can't actually be happening, not here." Like many others throughout history, my grandmother's family came to Syria from Yugoslavia seeking refuge from war and persecution. To us, Syria was the country that refugees fled to, not from. Despite my disbelief, as a proud member of the Syrian Boy Scouts, I conducted my scout's duty to assist those that were shocked and displaced by the unexpected yet rapidly escalating conflict.

Although I had grown accustomed to the bribes and corruption that permeated all levels of society, I could never envision the despicable destruction and suffering that came indiscriminately upon the people whose homes had been shelled and loved ones killed. Yet in the face of such wickedness, while working with refugees, I witnessed countless doctors volunteer their medical expertise free of charge to individuals in dire need of medical attention. In a conflict driven by differences and in a society where everything comes at a price, the singular entity that remained immune to such influences was medicine. Whether a patient identified as Sunni or Shia, was of Kurdish descent or natively Syrian, or supported the regime or opposed it, was immaterial. They were human beings with a right to live and nothing else mattered. This assistance - driven by goodwill alone - elucidated the deepest feelings of admiration in me. It was during these nascent stages of the Syrian civil war that my conviction in the altruism inherent to the field of medicine was first forged.

Two long years later I arrived in the United States. Having only recently attended the funeral of my dear friend Khaled, a young man killed by an explosive, made the feeling of being in the warmth and safety of Northern California all the more unbelievable. However, with conviction instilled in me and the realization that such an opportunity is beyond rare, I was primed to excel through any challenges this new world could present. I took advantage of my fortune and quickly learned the language and culture while focusing on my schooling at the local community college where I lived. My focus and success led me to UCLA where I achieved my undergraduate degree, but even more importantly, led me closer to the medical field that I held in such high reverence. Eager to get involved I began shadowing at the UCLA Medical Center emergency department.

It was only one week into shadowing that I met Esmeralda, a low-income, uninsured, pregnant 28-year-old woman who came to the emergency room doubling over with abdominal pain. Several days earlier she had presented to a different emergency room with similar complaints but due to a language barrier and the refusal of staff to take her pain seriously she was carelessly dismissed. Now she had returned in serious distress and aware that her pregnancy was in danger. Upon hearing that her worst fears were suddenly true, Esmeralda began to weep inconsolable - her abdominal pain was only mild now compared to the pain of losing her child. I stared blankly at the floor, confused and angered. The same field that I had held in such high esteem was contradicted by sheer negligence, prejudice, and a system that discriminated against those less economically fortunate. Medicine had seemingly failed.

We all stood silent - the room filled only by the sounds of Esmeralda's sobbing. After several moments the attending physician sat quietly aside Esmeralda and lent out a kind hand. Speaking patiently through a translator he apologized for the suffering she unfairly had to endure. He tended to her gently and respectfully, explaining the situation in full detail and resolving any other concerns she had. Although the system had failed, the physician decided that he would not fail her too. In light of the failures of medicine, through the actions of the physician, my conviction in its selfless beauty was reaffirmed.

From patients dying in war overseas, to patients like Esmeralda that are discriminated by society, to patients like my untreated 25-year-old cousin with schizophrenia who died from early suicide, my journey to

medicine has left a deep impression on me. Through these experiences I have seen both the failures of medicine but also its tremendous power to improve lives. I have found that I am a person who cares greatly, connects deeply, and feels passionately about patients, their families, and the lives they wish to enjoy. Most importantly, I have found that I cannot sit on the outside looking in while others require assistance; I must play a role.

Thus, I am ready to take the next step forward from that of a scout, student, volunteer, and researcher. My experiences have prepared for the arduous road ahead as I bring with me a global perspective rooted in war in Syria contrasted to healthcare in California. Above all, I am devoted to taking on the responsibility of caring for another with my fullest ability while continuing forward the altruistic legacy of medicine in the role of a physician.