

Technical Difficulties in the Time of COVID

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As a medical student, I learned of the power of touch, the personal connection—
never dreamed of virtual waiting rooms,
virtual visits in living rooms, grocery stores, and parking lots,
waving hello and goodbye through pixelated screens.

As ethernet cables twist about my knees and
extension cords weave about my ankles like kudzu,
a young patient and her parents connect from her turquoise bedroom.
I squint at the flickering screen—is that nystagmus or a transmission glitch?
Is her chorea progressing or is that just a poor connection?

A mother in her kitchen weeps over the phone at
her inability to connect to the virtual waiting room,
her poor Internet connection as much of a barrier as her broken down car and
the Medicaid cabs that never came.

I struggle, talking a dad in his car through the technical issues of another visit,
embarrassed that I can't offer more—
I'm the one who's always calling the helpdesk—
and confess my 9-year-old daughter had to show me how to navigate Zoom conferences.
I ask if all are healthy, and is there enough food?
Through an intermittently freezing screen we confirm medication doses and refills.
We share hopes for a future without this pandemic.

Another visit goes better—mom calls from a toy-covered backyard—
the baby is no longer seizing, he is walking—
proudly, he stumbles and lurches forward, reaching toward the screen, laughing—
the three of us smile wide, reveling in this moment.

I stretch, rub my eyes, clean my glasses, hit connect—and no one appears.
I start calling the list of numbers in the electronic record.
Forgotten appointment? WiFi failure?
Finally we make contact as my teenaged patient sits hunched over on the floor of a hallway,
flowered wallpaper peeling behind the baggy sweatshirt and curtain of bangs.

We talk about the headaches which have only worsened
with the loneliness of this pandemic.
The connection drops, and
we reconnect, commiserating about
technical difficulties in the time of COVID.

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