



## We do what we can

Sarah Fraser MSc MD CCFP

It will come as no surprise to physicians that our patients do not always do as we say. Treatment cannot be imposed upon the competent patient, even if in his or her best interest. I wrote this poem as a second-year medical student. It is about recognizing that we cannot always help everyone, and about the process of growing to be okay with that.

### Teenage apathy versus cervical adenopathy

The teenager's adenopathy (lump)  
blanketed one side of her neck

Her drug list was long.  
cigarettes, alcohol, special K,  
marijuana, benzos  
fentanyl and amphetamines

*What?* she said  
*When left to their own devices*  
*Some people try shit*

While I was palpating her nodes  
she requested to leave for a smoke

I told her the exam wouldn't last much longer and  
her boyfriend encouraged her to stay, too  
She would need to see ENT  
but had skipped such appointments in the past

Out for a smoke  
and she didn't come back

Two months later sitting on the street at night  
she was begging for money with her boyfriend

I gave them five dollars  
but they didn't recognize me  
or thank me for the money

which I was ambivalent about

Her adenopathy had grown significantly

Dr Fraser is an author and a family physician practising in Dartmouth, NS.

**Competing interests**  
None declared

