



Once upon a time ...

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This month in *Canadian Family Physician (CFP)* we present stories of life, death, and suffering. The following story is difficult to tell because it touches on subjects that we usually prefer to avoid and that make us uncomfortable: relations between anglophones and francophones in Canada; the use of nonmedical and non-evidence-based texts in medicine; an author torn apart, fragile, and ill; the suffering of love and the fear of abandonment; suicide; and physicians who help patients die. In short, topics that we generally prefer not to mention (Shhh!) in *CFP* but that nonetheless merit our attention.

There was once a time, many years ago now, during a family medicine conference, that a workshop on using literature as a tool for reflection and education in medicine was offered. The topic was interesting and inviting.

Relations between anglophone and francophone family physicians

Right from the start, the lecturer had a surprising and intriguing allure. He was anglophone and, despite a heavy accent, he ventured to express himself in a French he had probably learned in high school just as most Québécois had learned his language in college. He charmed us with the effort he made to address us in our mother tongue. This was unusual and delightful. We francophones are not used to being treated this way; generally, when doctors in this country get together, there only needs to be a few anglophones among many francophones for the language of the former to hold sway. Too bad about the difficulty this poses for others. (Shhh!) It doesn't take much to please the Québécois of this world. A simple "Bonjour" and a few words of introduction amply suffice. So imagine the effect produced by this unilingual doctor who was offering a workshop in French.

"Returning on April 11"¹

He invited us to read an excerpt from a text by a Québécois author of whom I had never even heard. What a paradox: here was an anglophone doctor from far away helping me discover an author right on my own doorstep. (Shhh!)

The suffering of love and the fear of abandonment

The text told of an unhappy man left behind when his lover went off to Europe. He wandered in the dark

and snowy streets of Montreal. Life no longer made sense. He kept imagining his loved one over there, surrounded by people, adored, touched, loved. He was alone and so depressed. Who has not felt a powerful desire to die after experiencing the pain of love, of being deserted by someone dear, or of the death of a child? (Shhh!)

Suicide

He wrote to her: "You need to know; I'll put it plainly. I am not taking the trouble to prove to you that I still exist, alas, but to let you know that I have tried to take my life." (Hush now!)

Doctors helping patients die

He badly wanted to die, but how was he to go about it? He went to see one of his friends who was a doctor: "It had been a long time since I had last seen Olivier L., but doctors are always so busy they don't know where their heads are. Olivier took a prescription pad and scribbled several illegible words [barbiturates] ... it only took me a few seconds to detach several pages from the prescription pad." Thus, without really wishing it, without even realizing it, his friend had made his death wish possible. How many among us have thus helped our patients to die? (Shhh!)

Hubert Aquin was able to die just as he wished. But absurdly he was "saved" by a telegram sent to him by his lady love saying she was returning on April 11, which meant that he was discovered at death's door.

That workshop was 20 years ago. I was young, high-spirited, alive, and in love. So many emotions were brought forth by that evening, that meeting, that lecture. Stories occupy an important place in our lives. They shape our existence. This story pays homage to a great anglophone doctor who will never know of my esteem for him (and he is not the only one) and a great Québécois author who will never know either because he committed suicide in 1977.

Is it really necessary to keep quiet about these stories? ❁

Reference

1. Aquin H. *Blocs erratiques*. Montreal, Que: Les Quinzes; 1977.