Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Women of Healthcare and Science – by Hugh Silk

I attended a funeral recently of someone who had contributed her life to science and medicine. I was honoured to be there and to have known her. As I stood next to her grandchildren and great grandchildren, I wondered if they knew all she had done and sacrificed to ultimately help so many. As far as I know, nothing was mentioned of her life of service during the eulogies. Of course I was told they talked about her role in the community and in her family. I could tell they talked about her in a loving way by the emotion in their voice and by the tears that were shed. But even by those who knew her best, she was not honoured for what she offered science.

You see, I was not entirely sure what was said as the service was in German. My friend was Amish. The Amish live a plain life and mostly keep to themselves. When John Hopkins came to Lancaster County with the intent of studying genetic diseases, (the Amish are a closed community so it is a perfect environment for studying genetic diseases,) they did not get very far until Mary said she would help them. She was the one who knocked on the door and made the introduction for the researchers. Without her, the research never would have happened. And so it made me think about all of the other unsung heroes in our country and beyond who offer so much for the advancement of science and never win any awards or even rise to the level of an honourable mention.

No doubt, Mary is the tip of the iceberg. Medical schools depend on people who play roles as standardized patients for being interviewed, examined, and to teach intimate skills like the female pelvic and male testicular exam. Other patients offer their time to come to talk with students at the front of a lecture hall about what they have been through themselves or have endured as a caregiver. And of course every time a patient enters a teaching hospital, they are helping the students, residents, and fellows learn their craft.

There is no accurate way to estimate how many people go unheralded for their “volunteer” work to help medicine and science advance. Beyond medical schools and residencies there are so many other health learners – nursing, midwifery, pharmacy, social work, dentistry, physician assistants – to name a few who have their own dependence on the kindness of the public and their sacrifices in the name of learning. Research depends on “subjects” who either receive the treatment or a placebo. Many people are very sick and have to endure the treatment with no benefit as a sacrifice to see if the treatment really works. Who amongst us would willingly take the ‘no treatment’ option in the face of cancer or depression or even significant bowel issues?

The only statistics that touch the surface show that millions of people participate in clinical trials. A few years ago, one analysis of registered national public and private clinical trials showed that
almost 11 000 on-going trials were in the process of enrolling 2.8 million subjects. Each of these studies employs numerous administrative people to assist in the work and we seldom hear their names either. They are lucky if their name gets mentioned in the acknowledgements. There are also over 2000 primary care health care schools and programs in the US each with tens to hundreds of students. Many programs employ dozens of standardized patients. The Association of Standardized Patient Educators estimates there are thousands of standardized patients in the US. Again, we do very little to celebrate these unsung heroes of our health care system.

By now, many are aware of the role that Henrietta Lacks played in the role of research. This is thanks to the persistent work of Rebecca Skoot. When I completed Ms. Skoot’s book my thoughts were – thank you Henrietta. Then I thought, shame on us in medicine. In a profession so dedicated to teaching and practicing ethically and with altruism, how could we have such blatant disregard for the dignity of a patient? How could we overlook the act of gratitude and reward?

As an undergraduate at Harvard University, Dr Robert Coles introduced me to the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* authored by James Agee. It was a pivotal moment in my social development. Sure I had many uncles who were roofers and other family members who worked on auto assembly lines in Canada. But here was a professor channeling an author demanding our focus on the people who get forgotten. We read headlines about CEOs, Nobel Prize winners, actors and sports figures, but what about the share croppers and for that matter the people who shine our shoes or clean our toilets Dr Coles asked us with vigor? For our medical and health science world, we can widen our lens to include all those who have advanced our education, research, and practice. Yet, first we have to realize we have a lens, clean the lens, and remember to use it.

In the medical school where I work, an award is given to the member of the community who offers our students the most teaching. This is certainly a start. Our students have a service for the families of the person who gave their body to be their cadaver for anatomy class. Our Chancellor tells our graduates to go and thank the custodial staff on graduation day for their role in their educational advancement. Medical students chastise other students for staring at their computer when a visiting patient is pouring out their soul in lieu of a lecture in the classroom.

No plaque will be given to my friend Mary. No grant will be created in her honour. She will remain unsung and unheralded. In fact, as an Amish women, she would want it that way and so I am not even using her real name. Yet another sacrifice on her part. But perhaps, her story can be honoured by all of us in medicine through our future actions. A good friend of mine who is a midwife gave me some advice when I began to deliver babies as a family medicine resident: write a thank you note to each mother after you take part in their labour and birthing process. Why should they only be thanking you?

Each of us needs to find our own way to thank patients, research participants, our administrative team, the investigative staff, community health workers, etc. Be humble. Be grateful. Reflect on the role of others that affect your work and care. Let us now praise the not so famous men and women of healthcare and science.