

Student in Duke Master of Biomedical Sciences Program

Personal Statement Draft 6 (4,701 characters)

Her story was written on the dusty bones sprawled across my exam table: a thirty-year-old woman from North Carolina with debilitating arthritis and a suppressed immune system. While this woman died over 350 years ago, I was still able to interpret the story she left behind. Working in an osteology lab for four years taught me that I value working with my hands and paying attention to small details to solve problems. I see myself fulfilled by these same actions through a career in medicine where I can work hands-on with my patients and piece together the minute details of their cases.

The process of analyzing this thirty-year-old woman's body began after I opened a long cardboard box. I could smell dusty clay as I laid out each piece of bone, shattered fragments that I would later piece back together. The minute patterns and textures hinted at what each piece was as I rebuild the picture of this human being. Once her skeleton was reassembled, I measured her long bones, pelvis, and cranium then analyzed the characteristics of each to decipher her sex and age. This process slowly gave her bones an identity, and I learned that my ability to solve problems is a skill and passion that motivates me.

To continue putting together this woman's story, I began to scour the bones for any abnormal markings that would represent injuries, illnesses, or activities that she may have experienced. This step is always the most interesting: it is where I begin to see the person's life through the miniscule features. The bones of the thirty-year-old woman were covered in lytic lesions, showed porosity around her eyes, and were sprouting anew in her nasal cavity. These details revealed three significant facts: she had an aggressive fungal disease that was affecting her joints; she was malnourished, and she had chronic sinusitis. By undertaking these activities in the lab, I found my passion for anatomy and what the body can reveal about a person's life. Interpreting his woman's story is what piqued my interest in trying to discern how patients experience illnesses and how medicine impacts their lives.

In my pursuit to learn the diversity of patients' perspectives, values, and experiences surrounding medicine, I began to look beyond my traditional biology and chemistry courses. Ultimately, I created my second undergraduate major in medical anthropology to learn how I can use this information to improve patient health and the practice of medicine. This led me to learn about various cultures, medical systems, and social determinants of health. My interests culminated in my most meaningful course "Practicing Medical Anthropology." In this course, we did not narrow our focus to one specific group of people or health disparity. Rather, we studied the process of communication with patients by designing and practicing interview techniques to understand the factors that influence patients' interpretations of health and illness.

Equally important, I honed my communication skills and put them to practice through interviews with breast-feeding mothers in central North Carolina. The goal of these interviews was to understand patients' experiences surrounding breast-feeding. The mothers shared with me the expectations, feelings, and challenges they faced breastfeeding and how the challenges were different with every child they had. Collecting this vast array of narratives reinforced my belief in

the value in understanding unique experiences and how they can be used to improve health. Medical anthropology taught me that no two experiences are the same, and each requires its own approach. Similarly, while listening to patient's stories, I watched each woman's expressions and body language as she spoke. My time in osteology taught me that the details are what can complete a picture and are what help me to see a patient as an entire person.

Unlike the skeletons in my osteology lab that offered me only a glimpse into their stories, medical anthropology created a space for me to learn the value of listening and understanding the rich diversity of real patients' stories. I also learned how to best use this knowledge to enhance health by having a holistic view of each patient as a person and not as a set of symptoms. Having this personal view of a patient will allow me to be creative in my approach to find a way to relate to each patient and to inspire her to reach a better state of health. Consequently, while it is the hands-on, detailed skills and lessons from osteology that drive me towards a career in health sciences, it is the opportunity to work alongside and connect with people to improve their health that motivates me to pursue a career as a physician.