How medical writing saves lives

When I heard the brief for this competition, ‘How medical writing saves lives’, these vignettes popped into my mind. This piece is not an essay and it doesn't have any references – it’s a story that illustrates what the brief meant to me. It hopefully paints a picture worth a thousand words.

A hospital

‘No, nana, no. Don’t leave us. Don’t leave us!’, sniffled the little girl, her eyes wide with fear and discouragement.

Her trembling voice broke the monotony of the silence that had been in the room for minutes, hours, days... for far too long. It hung ominously, interrupted only by the regular beeping of the machines that nana was connected to.

Margot raised her head and looked at the pair of them, her little girl a splash of pink in the otherwise drab monochrome grey room, while nana got lost under the harsh, clinical lighting, her skin pale and lifeless, her forehead damp with beads of sweat from the fever. Margot detested seeing her mother like this, hooked up to so many tubes and machines, her eyes tightly closed, her face locked in a grimace of pain. All three occupants were at breaking point; the two weeks spent in this grey, antiseptic room seemed interminable.

If it wasn’t for that tiny sliver of hope that Margot felt, she would have given up and sobbed for this tableau in which she herself was stuck in. The room was thick with despair, crushing all three people with its weight.

However, belying the situation, Margot was not totally despondent, and her eyes held a flicker of hope. She hadn’t given up on the situation, on her daughter’s nana, on the woman who gave her life so she could grow up a confident, happy woman.

No. She did what she did best as a scientist. Through extensive research, on PubMed and Google Scholar, on medical news websites and online forums, she had discovered the congress, in which many new studies were presented. A few months ago, she’d attended the conference, wandering through the halls, almost aimlessly, almost despairingly. But suddenly she’d stopped in front of poster P-247, and the flicker of hope was born. And now they were here, as a result of that poster.

The nurse stepped into the picture in front of her to plug a vial containing a clear liquid into the many tubes that were hooked to nana.

Drip. Drip. Drip. The tube filled with clear liquid, which flowed down it. The clear liquid went into nana’s veins. They waited.

‘Thank you Joanna. Thank you for giving us hope’, whispered Margot, a tear in her eye.

A playground

‘No, nana, no. It tickles. It tickles!’ squealed the little girl, her eyes shining with mirth.

The joyful sound broke through the other children’s playful shouts and reached Margot. A cacophony of sound was all around them, the children’s happy playing occasionally interrupted by a parent’s shout.

Margot raised her head and looked at the pair of them, her little girl a splash of pink in the otherwise psychedelic surroundings, in which instead her nana blended in, although her multi-coloured dress vividly contrasted the healthy hue of her skin. Nana’s forehead was damp with sweat from chasing the little girl, her fingers busy moving against the granddaughter’s skin, her face lit up with a jubilant smile. Margot cherished the lively expression on nana’s face, her quick movements, her loud confident voice. Everyone was ecstatic; it was the first such outing since nana had been given the all-clear. All three family members wanted this moment – in the
playground under the bright sun, surrounded by happy children, green trees and chirping birds – to be interminable, to last forever.

Margot grinned at the tableau in front of her; what was once just a tiny sliver of hope for the future now filled her chest. She could have cried for joy, seeing the two people she loved most so happy. She felt as weightless as a feather, as if she was floating on air.

Yes. She’d done what she always did as a scientist. She’d gone to that congress now more than a year ago, she’d looked at that poster, P-247, read the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and felt that tiny flicker of hope be born. Afterwards, she’d felt that hope expand, when they talked to the study investigators about nana. And now they were here, as a result of that flicker of hope.

Her dog suddenly stepped into the picture, chasing her little girl and her nana.

Giggle. Laugh. Squeal. The clumsy dog caught the girl, licking her face. The girl jumped into her nana’s arms. They collapsed into a giggling heap of happiness.

‘Thank you Joanna. Thank you for giving us hope’, whispered Margot, a tear in her eyes.

A name

A woman sat at her desk, bedraggled after another long day. Her colleagues had all gone home for the day, but she’d persevered another night to finish her poster. She didn’t mind. It was her passion, and delays had consequences.

Type. Type. Type. Her poster described a new pivotal clinical trial, condensing the methods described in the protocol into a concise, easily digestible, readable piece.

Suddenly, she remembered. She stopped her furious typing to rummage for a previous example of a poster describing a similar trial. Poring over the unorganised mass of papers on her desk, she finally found what she was looking for – poster P-247, the same poster that Margot had seen so long ago. And at the bottom right-hand corner of the poster, written in a small font and placed inconspicuously, was the name that had been in Margot’s memory ever since.

Acknowledgements: the authors would like to thank Joanna Dancy for medical writing and editorial assistance.