

A Love Letter to Nursing

By Jamie Shepherd

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A hospital is never a pleasant place to be. When you picture it, you imagine the image of stark white walls, the vexatious scent of antiseptic mingling with coffee, and the sound of urgent footsteps echoing through tiled hallways. Australia's healthcare workers spend entire days and sleepless nights in this setting, whilst dealing with confronting medical cases that prey on their minds long after the job is done.

Healthcare workers suffer significantly when it comes to their mental health and require a healthy outlet for their pent-up emotions. For one nurse in particular, their art is an outlet, and their recent piece titled 'Commercial Road Love Letter' is a reflection of just how difficult their job can be.

"I find I'm passionate about it (work) even when it's difficult, even when I'm crying about it, even when I feel like it's weighing me down and eating at me. It's persistently emboldening – I'm really grateful to work my job."



On June 17th, nurse and artist Darcy Simpson released a set of photographs titled 'Commercial Road Love Letter'; a piece that encapsulates the mental hardships faced in the healthcare industry.

"Healthcare is really separate from art, and for me - having a job so time consuming that takes a lot of energy and emotion from me – it (art) has become an outlet, it's fuelled by needing time away from what I do professionally."

I visited Darcy one evening and we sat outside in the brisk Melbourne winter. I listened to Darcy explain to me their motivation to put this piece together and the creative process behind it.

'Commercial Road Love Letter' is comprised of 12 film photographs taken by Darcy while on placement at the Alfred Hospital on Commercial Road during the final year of their nursing degree. Each photo was taken after a case or experience that Darcy felt changed them, whether it was traumatising, or if it made them feel proud or sad – each image capturing exactly what Darcy was seeing whilst processing difficult emotions.

Darcy reclined back into the outdoor sofa, relaying the feelings and images in their mind as they spoke.

"I got to a point where I had a lot of feelings built up from nursing that I felt I didn't have an avenue to express them in a way that people could understand – it's hard to talk about the experiences of healthcare with people who aren't in the job, they won't ever fully understand."

Due to their profession, nurses face an elevated risk of developing negative mental states such as depression, anxiety and stress. Burnout is particularly common, as it is specific to an

individual's relationship with their profession, which can result in poor work ethic and poor coping mechanisms such as substance abuse and absenteeism.

Repeated exposure to such stressful patient-related cases lead to many stress related outcomes, such as heightened anxiety at work and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Without an outlet to express such feelings, such outcomes can lead to severe consequences, and ignoring the consistent outcry from our healthcare professionals can result in lower quality patient care.

Darcy consistently advocates for change within the healthcare industry and is passionate about changing the attitudes and beliefs associated with opening up about hardships faced at work.

"There's a really big hear no evil, speak no evil culture in healthcare. We're all as traumatised as each other by what we have to face, and nobody really talks about what that does to you. Nobody is willing to talk about the whole, "I love my job and I get an enormous amount of fulfillment from it but I'm fucking traumatised by it". I felt it was important for me to capture instances of that.", Darcy says, promptly pulling up the photographs and explaining each one individually, cold fingers pointing at tiny details.

One photograph in 'Commercial Road Love Letter' is described by Darcy as a very "raw feeling", one that they still struggle to look back on. Taken in the bathroom of their student accommodation after a particularly confronting case, the image of the sink, mirror and window holds a tender memory of what once was.

Upon publicly sharing these photographs, Darcy stated in the caption of their Instagram post that the bathroom photo specifically "speaks more to the monotone numbness you are left with more often than not, lingering like television static.". The piece as a whole was also described as an "expansion of a reflective practise", reflecting on feelings that can't be described well enough by words alone. Darcy explained to me how they cope with difficult feelings after work by taking a photo of the sky post-shift and writes exactly what made that day hard.



"It (the piece) was really well received, and I thought it was important for me to put out. It's hard to identify yourself in healthcare, and it was important to me as an aspect of closure. I'm passionate about changing attitudes and beliefs in healthcare, the notion that you can't really talk about it, and I wanted to display that in just 10 or so slides.". I see a small cloud of breath escape Darcy's mouth as they sigh, smiling with pride.

For nurses, there is a stigma surrounding mental health in healthcare settings. This discourages the nurses from seeking help or talking openly about their struggles. The piece 'Commercial Road Love Letter' is just one nurse's story, and allowed Darcy to share their life-altering experiences in a way more people could understand.

This work of art is a call to action, encouraging nurses to speak out about their feelings and encouraging others to listen.

