


“Hey, Uce”

Category: New Voices

written by Andrew O. | September 10, 2024



I bowed and spread
out my hands in
front of me...

I'll never forget my shadowing experience in the emergency department during my first year of medical school.

Scanning that morning's list of patients, I saw a last name that made me do a double-take. A distinctly Samoan name: Mr. Fuaga.

My father's side of the family came to the States from Samoa before I was born, and I grew up curious about Polynesian culture. My father always taught me to seek out fellow Pacific Islanders in whatever path I pursued, no matter how few of us there might be.

“There's something special about bonding over our identities,” he'd say.

He himself modeled how this could look, playing rugby and football throughout high school and college and forming close friendships with many Polynesians through these activities, which are common in our culture. Therefore, I had been eager to connect with those from my culture in a healthcare setting, and especially eager to meet my first Pacific Islander patient.

Here he was at last—a fifty-two-year-old man with diabetes who'd come into the ED for worsening cloudy vision over the past few years.

Entering the patient's room with my attending, Dr. Klein, I immediately scurried to one corner, per the usual protocol, as he woke Mr. Fuaga up from his nap.

“Hello, sir; I'm the doctor who'll be taking care of you today. My apologies

for waking you.”

Mr. Fuaga chuckled and rubbed his eyes. “No worries at all, Doc. I just want to start seeing better again.”

He yawned and stretched, revealing the traditional Samoan tattoos, called pe’a, around his thighs and legs. My uncles have the same tattoos; in our culture, they serve as a painful rite of passage—a symbol of manhood and courage.

Dr. Klein glanced at me as I stood in the corner, off to Mr. Fuaga’s right. “Oh, I almost forgot. We also have a student here. Is it okay if he joins us?”

I waved at Mr. Fuaga—then saw that he had a white cataract in his right eye, so couldn’t see me. He reminded me of my grandfather, a Samoan man who’d also struggled with cataracts towards the end of his eighty-three years of life.

“Sure! I don’t have much to offer, but I love when I can teach the students anything,” Mr. Fuaga said amiably.

“Let’s see how your vision is...follow my finger with your eyes, and tell me when you lose sight of it,” said Dr. Klein.

“Right there; it’s gone now,” Mr. Fuaga said as Dr. Klein’s finger moved to the right.

“If you squint, does that make things any better?”

“Not really. I’ve just been turning to the right whenever I need to see something in that direction,” said Mr. Fuaga, turning his head to demonstrate. This brought me into his line of sight.

As we locked eyes, he paused, then gave me a nod, smiling. I gave a quick grin in return.

“It looks like you have a cataract in that eye, and it’s started to become more noticeable to you,” said Dr. Klein.

“Ah, okay,” said Mr. Fuaga, still smiling. “All of the elders in my village eventually got cataracts. Is it just a Samoan thing?”

“It’s a getting-old thing,” Dr. Klein replied with a laugh. “You can make an appointment with one of our ophthalmologists, and they’ll take a closer look at it.”

“Thanks, Doc. I appreciate it.”

As Dr. Klein walked out, I took a step towards the door, then paused and turned back to Mr. Fuaga.

I bowed and spread out my hands in front of me—a gesture that, in Samoan culture, signifies respect for another person and thankfulness for their

presence.

Mr. Fuaga started to tear up.

In that moment, I understood that, just as eagerly as I'd been waiting for my first Samoan patient, he had been waiting for his first Samoan doctor—or, in this case, doctor-to-be.

I started towards the door, but Mr. Fuaga's voice stopped me.

"Hey, *uce*."

Uce—a word I've heard at countless family barbecues, youth baseball games and gatherings with fellow Polynesians. *Uce* is what we say in Samoan culture when we consider you to be our brother or sister.

This was the moment I had been waiting for ever since starting medical school, and it underscored what medicine has always meant to me: being a voice of representation, fellowship and pride for the small, but strong, Pacific Islander community.

I turned back to Mr. Fuaga, and once again, we locked eyes.

"I am so proud of you," he said, smiling. "Keep going."

I smiled back at him; then I left.

During my progress through medical school, I've often thought about my encounter with Mr. Fuaga. Growing up, I never met a Samoan physician—and for the longest time, I thought that a career in medicine simply wasn't possible for someone of my background.

Now, years later, with medical-school graduation coming up, I still have yet to meet a Samoan physician. The difference, though, is that now I believe *I* can be that physician for others.

And my encounter with Mr. Fuaga has taught me to lean into this responsibility with honor.