

Appearances Can Indeed be Deceiving

Category: The Exam Room

written by Jill Rovitzky Black | September 8, 2025

It was long enough ago that I can't recall why (did I change jobs? did my doctor stop taking my insurance?), but I was forced to find a new ob-gyn. Anyway, this would be my first female doctor, which promised to make the annual visit more comfortable.

Indeed, "comfortable" seemed to be the byword of her practice. The tastefully appointed waiting room with its soft lighting, vintage botanical prints, and soothing pastels looked more like a Laura Ashley living room than a conventional doctor's office. There was a nicer than usual selection of magazines, too, I noticed. I sank appreciatively into a cushy floral armchair to wait my turn to meet my new doctor.

Soon I discovered that the same decidedly feminine décor softened the cold, clinical edges of the exam room. The best part: Tucked into a corner was an actual dressing room, like something highjacked from a chic boutique.

As someone perpetually certain that the door to the hallway will pop open and expose me to a gawking crowd just before I can drape my naked self with the gown, I was grateful for that little dressing room. And impressed. I interpreted that thoughtful attention to privacy as evidence that this welcoming practice paid attention to the emotional as well the medical needs of women. Clearly, I thought, this is the difference between seeing a male and a female physician.

Finally, the doctor swept in, brisk and brusque as she introduced herself, reviewed my history, and examined me. Her no-nonsense style didn't bother me. She's busy, I thought, with lots of patients to see, and this is all pro forma stuff anyhow.

Then I brought up my questions. Or tried to.

Before I could get a complete sentence out of my mouth, she shot a response back at me. Although it sounded authoritative, it didn't quite answer what I was asking—not surprising, given that she hadn't heard my full question. I tried again. Same thing. And again. She served up quick, canned answers, reassuring me about concerns I didn't have without addressing those I did.

Too callow and shy to challenge a doctor in those days, I smiled, thanked her, and left, taking with me an invaluable lesson. Bare-bones setting or elegant ambience, male or female doctor—those are immaterial. What truly matters is that the clinician listens to the patient.

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