

# Mine and Theirs

Category: The Exam Room

written by John Frey | September 8, 2025

Forty-five years ago, during a sabbatical at a solo practice in a rural village in Wales, I learned to push back against office conformity.

The British National Health Service (NHS) had a prescribed set of colors for exam room furniture that they undoubtedly bought in bulk and provided as part of their support for general practitioners. Most offices I visited during my nine months with the NHS had standard-issue exam rooms.

But the physician I worked with never colored between the lines. He hung mobiles of airplanes, ballet dancers, and animals around the room. He filled his walls with photos of family, teachers and colleagues, and the great singer Paul Robeson, whom he'd briefly cared for in the 1950s. He was an inveterate maker of toys, and his bookcases were covered with them. And, since our village was a Welsh mining village, he did whimsical drawings of miners at work and of the village itself. He also had the usual cabinets of medical instruments and an exam couch, but he wore a shirt and tie and sport coat, never a white coat.

When I went back to a new position in the U.S., my clinic, of course, was not mine. It was theirs—the department, the school, the health system. They chose the things on the wall, the organization of the room. Everything was interchangeable and nothing looked or felt like me. And most people wore white coats.

Gradually, I began subversively adding things to the walls—photos of the region and community and colleagues, prints that I liked. Others began to do the same thing. None of us “owned” a room but the faculty started to decorate exam rooms where we could each feel like ourselves. We'd bring in prints and ask the nurses if they liked them enough to put up. They, of course, had to live with them too. I worked there for the next thirteen years, and it never felt corporate, even when we moved into a larger clinic.

What we put on walls and bookshelves tells patients who we are and what we value. I continued as a subversive until I retired—and I left a number of photos and prints in my clinic when I did. But one poster—a gift after an incredible delivery experience—now hangs on my wall at home. My diplomas are in a box somewhere. I think.

As a patient, I am back in a world of corporate ownership. Back in rooms that are theirs, not mine—but that would benefit from a bit of clutter.

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