

The Unspoken Curriculum

Category: Microaggressions: a Thousand Cuts
written by Dana Wang | May 1, 2026

To the physicians who teach us,

I'm writing to share a side of medical education that your students won't necessarily tell you about during our clerkships, but that significantly impacts our medical journeys and, ultimately, our careers. During rotations, there are things that you see and evaluate us on: clinical skills, teamwork, medical knowledge. And then there are the silent battles that we face, particularly for those of us who may not look like our patients or like a doctor is presumed to look.

For example, curious patients often ask questions like these when you're not around:

"So, are you studying to be a nurse?"

"Aren't you too young to be a doctor?"

"Where are you really from?"

Sometimes, they're eager—maybe extra-curious—and they'll ask such questions when you *are* around. And I expect you're just as curious to know how I respond:

"So, how long have you been in America?"

"Well, all my life, sir."

"Curious" is the most positive way to frame these interactions. I choose to believe that such patients are excited to share their stories and learn about mine:

"Where's your family from?"

"X [country]."

"Oh! I fought in the X war. Of course, that wasn't your fault."

Occasionally (more often than I'd like) I'm mistaken for a peer who looks similar to me. Like when a department chair walked up to me and said, "Hey, _____, good to see you! How are residency interviews going?"

Only I was just a second-year, and that wasn't my name. We are, however, both Asian women. So I texted my fellow student to let her know that the chair was looking for her, and I kept moving forward.

And then there are the moments like these, which I never mention to you...

"Hi, I'm _____. I'm a medical student and I'll be getting you started for

your visit.”

“Oh, thank goodness you don’t have an accent.”

..because I know there are more immediate battles to face, such as:

“Thank you, I’m glad we can communicate well! Tell me about your recent fainting spells.”

I share all this not for sympathy, but for awareness. These encounters accumulate during our training, shaping how we speak, how we move, and how we listen. They can make a heavy day feel heavier and influence when we choose to explain ourselves or let things pass.

Your presence, curiosity, and willingness to notice these moments can make the difference between a trainee quietly absorbing such experiences alone or being allowed to name them out loud. I hope that by sharing this insight into our world, we can make medicine feel a little more spacious for all who are learning within this space.

With gratitude and hope,
A medical student

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