

A Shared Language

Category: Race

written by Kelley Yuan | August 12, 2016

I was waiting on a friend who had injured her arm. They entered later and huddled in the seats nearby, murmuring in hushed Korean and peering at the English signs.

Feverish and weak, the mother clutched her stomach while her husband stroked her arm. You could tell the son was anxious by the way he kept tugging at his father's wrist to check his watch, the way he paced in little circles and rubbed his mother's hand.

The boy was a scrappy little guy. He recognized the dark hair and almond eyes I shared with his family. After half an hour, I felt a tap on my knee. "Excuse me," he said in broken English, and then asked me a question in Korean. I only understood Chinese and English, so I held up one finger and signaled that I would come back. At the front desk I spoke with a black nurse and white receptionist, and they tried finding an interpreter. The only Asian staff members they could reach spoke Cantonese and Vietnamese.

Soon the same nurse came to escort the mother to an exam. The nurse smiled and spoke patiently and softly, hand resting on the mother's shoulder. She greeted the father and wrote her name on a post-it note for him if he needed to find her again later. Then she traced the rim of her watch to the 5:00 notch for the boy. At 5:00, she pointed, he could see his mom again.

Body language and compassion convey what spoken words cannot. They see no color and need no translation. This nurse proves why empathy remains the keystone of good medicine. It soothes more than the strongest drug ever can.

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