

A Little Gesture Goes a Long Way

Category: Speaking Up

written by Molly McDermott | February 23, 2021

In the past year, I have attended multiple diversity training sessions that have opened my eyes to understanding health equity, social injustice, and institutionalized racism. Prior to this, I had not fully understood or acknowledged my white privilege. And I did not know how to use that privilege to be an advocate for those who have little to no voice and who can be taken advantage of by the health-care system.

Recently, I had an opportunity to put into practice what I have learned and to exemplify the cultural sensitivity that I feel is lacking in medical education. On my pediatric rotation, our team had a three-day-old baby boy. He'd had been a normal birth but was transferred from the newborn nursery to the pediatric floor because he required phototherapy for hyperbilirubinemia, a disorder of the red blood cells.

As I entered the patient's room alongside our team's medical student, I first focused on the baby, lying under the lights. I then turned to look at his mother, who had been sitting on the bed, and watched her suddenly dive into her bag to reach for a hijab as we entered after a quick knock.

Her relief at seeing two females enter the room was apparent. We pressed on, asking our usual questions—how the patient was doing, how feeding was going, and so on—and relayed the plan for the day. As I turned to leave, I mentioned that our attending that day was a male. The mother smiled and asked if we could notify her prior to entering so she would have time to dress appropriately.

Later, during rounds, we stopped outside the baby's room. As I presented the case to our male attending, the medical student went in ahead of us to alert the mother that we would be entering shortly. It was a seamless transition that allowed the mother to feel comfortable and focus on her son's care.

In reflecting on that day, I have realized how immensely important it is for small yet important tasks like that to be part of our daily practice as physicians. We must acknowledge diversity and learn from our patients, and their parents, to better serve them. I embrace the feeling of hopefulness I drew from that encounter to continue to promote a better tomorrow for the medical community and, ultimately, society as a whole.