

Girls Become Doctors

Category: Sexism

written by Olapeju Simoyan | May 27, 2022

When I was in medical school, one of our female attending physicians told us her young son had once been asked if he wanted to be a doctor when he grew up. "No," he replied. "Only girls are doctors!"

Obviously, he was saying this because his mother was a doctor. His father was a lawyer, so he probably would have said, "Boys become lawyers."

At that time, there were slightly more women than men in my medical school class. It would have been easy to assume that the gender stereotypes about women in the workplace were gradually becoming a thing of the past. Yet, in the years since I graduated from medical school, my experiences and those of my female colleagues show that this is certainly not the case.

During my residency training, a nurse told me I shouldn't sit at the computer station because "that's where the doctors sit." It didn't even occur to me to tell her that I was a doctor. My "imposter syndrome" validated her statement by reminding me that I was "just" a resident physician and maybe, by "doctors," she was referring to attending physicians. But that's not what she said. The white female medical student who was with me, obviously confused by the nurse's statement, said, "But you're a doctor!" Yes, I am a doctor, and that's what I should have told the nurse.

While it is easy to blame workplace sexism on men, it's important to acknowledge the ways in which women also contribute to this. Over the years, I have observed several situations in which another woman refers to my male colleagues as "Dr." while referring to my female colleagues and myself by our first names. While I try not to assume that people are intentionally being disrespectful, I am very aware of the subtle messages that accompany how we address people in the workplace. I recently told a co-worker that when she refers to my male trainee as "Dr." while referring to me by my first name in an email to someone in the organization that might not know who I am, the recipient of the email could easily assume that I am not a doctor. I did not get a response, much less an apology, but at least I spoke up, something I would have been less likely to do when I was younger and less experienced.

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