

Kindness in the OR

Category: Surgery

written by Ellen Zhang | October 20, 2022

Slowly, though much faster than I had anticipated, I fell into the natural rhythm of my surgery rotation as a medical student. I saw the patients in preop, greeted nurses and scrub technicians, wrote my name on the whiteboard, and helped wheel patients into the OR prior to their surgery.

I also learned how to drape and position patients once they were on the operating table, wheel their bed out of the room into the hallway, and scrub in for the procedure. If I was lucky, I could even assist with the surgery—holding a retractor or placing a suture. When the procedure was finished, I helped clean the surgical site, tear down the drapes, bring the bed back and move the patient onto the bed, and wheel the patient back to the postop area. Soon, I was used to the rhythm of surgery, knew what each step entailed, and was able to fully immerse myself in the intricate cases.

As a medical student, I felt that surgery was a field where the hierarchy of medicine was more prominent than in other fields, given the technique, skills, and expertise required in the operating room. It takes years of training and careful coordination to induce a patient into a sleep-like state and then open up their body.

Yet despite that hierarchy, one of my most memorable OR interactions occurred with a scrub technician—someone whose role is to ensure the correct instruments are available and the surgical field is sterilized. They are also the first ones to be scrubbed into the OR, and they help all other members of the team gown and glove for the procedure.

One day, after washing my hands thoroughly, I stepped into the OR ready to be gowned up. As the residents lined up behind me, I stepped to the side to let them go first. The scrub technician threw me a look and gestured for me to come on up. She fluidly got me into my gown and helped me double-glove. “Never think that you are unimportant,” she said kindly. “You matter as much as anyone in this room.”

That moment of kindness has stayed with me, long after my surgery rotation. Even though an OR can be cold, that moment was warm and bright. Even now, I am grateful for her words as I delve deeper into the field of medicine.

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