

On Being a Lady and a Doctor

Category: Stories

written by Caitlin Bass | September 28, 2018

Caitlin Bass ~

It's 8:00 pm, and it's hour fourteen in my twenty-eight-hour call shift at the large suburban hospital where I'm an intern.

You demand to speak with a doctor now, *right now*. You cannot wait. Your mother is sick, and you want to know exactly what is going on.

It doesn't matter that we already spoke at length by phone earlier this afternoon. It doesn't matter that it's 8:00 pm. It doesn't matter that I don't have any updates to give you.

You're here, and you want to speak with a doctor, your mother's doctor, now, *right now*.

Luckily for you, that's me.

I'm here.

I'm in the hospital.

I'm between codes and crises and admissions and can come now, *right now*, to discuss your mother's case in person.

And I don't just know your mother's case; I'm her doctor. She's been on our teaching service for days. She's *my* patient. I know her story like the back of my hand.

When I get there to speak to you, it's not just you. It's you and your wife and your mother's boyfriend and your uncle and your mother's caretaker.

There are so many of you that half of you are in the hallway, because you don't all fit into your mother's tiny hospital room.

It's heartwarming to see how loved and cared for your mother is. All of you are here because you're worried about her. That's why you need to see a doctor now, *right now*. Because every one of you has a question or a concern or a tidbit you think that I should know.

I shepherd all of you into the family room so that we can talk more easily. This way, at least we all fit in the same room.

I introduce myself to each of you in turn.

"Good evening, I'm Dr. Bass."

"I've been taking care of your mom/sister/girlfriend/mother-in-law, etc."

"Yes, I'm the one you spoke to on the phone."

We talk for quite a while. I answer each of your questions until I'm sure that you get it. You all thank me before I leave.

"Thank you, Miss Bass."

"Yes, thanks for taking the time to come and talk to us, Miss Bass."

"We appreciate your thoroughness, Miss Bass."

Miss? *Miss*? Are you kidding me? You've *got* to be kidding me.

You demanded to speak to a doctor, your mother's doctor, now, *right now*, and I came and answered your questions politely and with patience—and yet I'm still not the doctor?

That "Miss" just sucks the air right out of me. I don't know what to do with that. Suddenly I feel small.

I probably could have corrected you and said, "No, it's Doctor," but that didn't occur to me in the moment. I mean, how many times do I have to introduce myself as "Doctor" before it sticks?

At least once more, I guess. Because this isn't a one-off. This happens all the time.

I'll introduce myself, and the patient or family member will say, "And your first name is?"

And boy, do I want to say "Doctor"—but I don't. Wouldn't want to be antagonistic; can't threaten that doctor-patient relationship.

Then there are the times when I've just met a new patient in the hospital and introduced myself, and I'm asking about his condition, and he'll say, "Oh, yes—I need to mention that to the doctor when he gets here."

Then I do say, "Me, that's me! *I'm* your doctor."

Once I had a patient tell me that she was going home that day, and I certainly didn't have any plans to discharge her.

I asked her why she thought that.

"Oh, Bill said I could go," she replied, with calm certainty.

Bill is the unit's receptionist, but the patient had decided that he was in charge, because he's a man.

I always wonder who these people think I am, as they calmly and forthcomingly answer my extraordinarily probing personal questions.

Being mistaken for the nurse doesn't bother me. At least if they think I'm the nurse, they've realized that I'm part of their care team, which is better

than being some random “Miss.”

My mother is a nurse. My sister is a nurse. My grandmother was a nurse. Nursing is a noble profession. Nurses are some tough, loving, caring, amazing people—but I’m not your nurse.

I’m your doctor.

About the author:

Caitlin Bass is in the second year of an internal-medicine residency at Sarasota Memorial Hospital, FL. She loves writing, and she loves medicine. She writes about life and laughter and medicine on her blog Islandgypsydoctor.blogspot.com. “I write because in an ever more ‘connected’ world, I can’t help but feel disconnected, and writing helps me to remedy that feeling. I’ve been thinking about what it means to be a so-called Lady Doctor since my first day on the hospital wards, and I wanted to share my experience and hear the experiences of other ‘Lady Doctors.’ “

Story editor:

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