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The Unwritten Rules of Women in Medicine



Alyssa Brown

University of Louisville School of Medicine

“You could try being less of a bitch.” We were in the student workroom at the rural hospital—taking a brief refuge from the hectic morning. It was fall of my third year of medical school. The room wasn’t much, a converted supply closet with a couch and computer. The room was our hiding place to bemoan the rotation. There were just six of us on the rural surgery rotation and only one male student, “Austin” (*Names have been changed to protect the people involved*). I had been paired with Austin, and we rotated with the various surgeons. I never expected him to say anything like this to me. He was just so nice, but I should start from the beginning.

That morning, the attending assailed me for not remembering the replacement rate of potassium for a patient. I was used to the surgeon expecting a lot from me, but that day, it stung to get reprimanded so early. I had been in the hospital until 2 am for an emergency case, and I had returned to the hospital at 5 am for pre-rounding. I had barely slept. I wanted so badly to impress the surgeon because I aspired to be a surgeon. Austin and I worked well together. We were seamless on the team; we knew our roles and performed them. During the morning, he had not gotten berated by the attending for his mistake. He, in fact, forgot to check on one of the ICU patients. Austin’s mistakes and missteps had been accruing for the entire rotation. It seemed as though, the surgeon didn’t mind when Austin faltered, but I was always harangued for seemingly less egregious offenses. I took it in stride, but that day, I decided to ask Austin if he had noticed

this difference. All the students were sitting on the couches eating lunch. I asked him, “Do you think the surgeon treats you differently?” I clarified slightly that I did not think he should have gotten yelled at that morning, but it seemed like I got reamed over minor errors, while he was free to make them. He responded that he hadn’t noticed. I wasn’t shocked that he hadn’t, even though I hoped he would have. The next thing he said though stopped me, “You could try being less of a bitch.”

I am rarely silent, but how do I even respond to that? The room fell silent. I felt my face flush, and I fixed my eyes on the floor to prevent the tear forming in the corner of my eye from being seen. It felt like a punch to the gut and the air knocked out of my lungs. No one came to my defense or said anything. It instantly made me feel like I was no longer welcome. He tried to explain it by saying I can be competitive, bossy, and over-protective of my patients. I was running a list of our interactions. Was I a bitch? I always pulled his gown and gloves, I kept him updated on patients, I kept us on track and on time, I covered for his mistakes, and I even offered to split my granola bar from my locker when we missed lunch. This isn’t to say I was flawless. I can be stern when my concentration is broken. Our personalities were opposite—he was often lost in thought, while I was more intense. I was focused on doing my best for the team and patient.

“You could try being less of a bitch.” This rang in my ears and echoed in my heart. I spiraled; does everyone else see me this way?

It was a heady mix of sleep deprivation, anxiety, and malignant thoughts. I felt alone. I felt betrayed that no one stood up for me, and I felt embarrassed.

When the day was finally over, I got in my car and just drove. I had texted a friend, so she expected my call. I fondly referred to her as the brain in our friendship, while she called me the heart. I wear my heart on my sleeve, but she can translate my emotions into words when I fail to. She was on her surgical rotation too. She picked up on the third ring. Her response surprised me, “Alyssa, you are a bitch. It’s a good thing. You know what they call a man who’s a bitch? A go-getter. The frame is different for women. It’s seen as a negative, while in men it’s a positive.” I had never thought of it that way. It never crossed my mind that I would be judged by a different standard for being a woman in medicine. It was like I was finally let in on a big secret. As we talked, I realized there was an extra standard for women in medicine. You had to be: kind, sweet, soft, quiet, not too quiet, know everything but not act as such, look perfect, but nothing too tight or too low cut, be very friendly, don’t be too eager to volunteer over a man, put your makeup on in the morning, never come in with wet hair, don’t ever complain, don’t be sensitive, never be too confident, and this could continue indefinitely. It’s a hefty list all due to gender. It is more than I can ever be. I thought I just had to be empathetic, work hard, and be dedicated to the patients. I thought I could be myself.

“You could try being less of a bitch.” After reflecting, I promised myself that moving forward I wasn’t going to be less of a “bitch” to make someone else feel more comfortable. I want and demand the same respect. I should not be treated differently because I am a woman in medicine, despite the unfortunate reality. Together, we have to start dismantling the thought that there are an extra set of rules for women in medicine. These unwritten rules aren’t making us better doctors. If I get called a bitch for working hard and caring about the patients, so be it. If that’s the case, I’ll be a bitch.

Bio



Alyssa Brown grew up in Chattanooga, TN. She majored in Biology and History at Centre College in Kentucky where she played NCAA Division III Golf. After graduation, she started medical school at University of Louisville. She joined the local AMWA chapter at Louisville, and during her

second and third year of medical school, she was elected the president of the AMWA chapter. She started a monthly mentorship happy hour where students could meet residents and physicians, while money raised at these meetings was donated to a local women’s shelter. After third year of medical school, she moved to Rochester, MN to pursue a PhD in Biomedical Engineering and Physiology at Mayo Clinic. She participates in research involving inflammation’s effect on motor neuron function and congenital diaphragmatic hernia. She began chairing the Social Media and Branding Committee for AMWA nationally in late 2018. She has helped to grow the Instagram to 12.1k followers within the last year. When she is not working hard on her research or AMWA projects, she is baking sweets, going to concerts, or shadowing in the pediatric surgery OR.