

Women on the Moon

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It was another busy day for me, a female Afghani 3rd year medical student, in the trauma bay when I was called by the chief resident to help-out in the trauma clinic. In typical medical student fashion, I began to read on the patient I was to see first. After looking at his chart, I went to examine him, first taking in his appearance: He was a small, lanky, Caucasian man, on oxygen treatment sitting in a wheelchair. As I walked into the room to complete a history and physical exam, he told me about how impatient he was that day, asking why I, and not the surgeon who was treating him, was examining him today. I stated "I'm here to do a quick history and physical and check in on you—the surgeon will come to the room once I am done". He replied "Bring in a man who can do work". Initially shocked, I said, "Sure", acquiescing to his desires by requesting assistance from the male resident. He subsequently came into the room and talked to the patient and while performing a venous doppler ultrasound on him. Afterwards, the intern asked me to clean the ultrasound gel off the patient's leg. The patient then remarked, "Oh well a woman's job is what you are doing. Cleaning a wound while the male doctor does the actual job." I did not say anything; instead I looked at the resident in disbelief. The older man continued, rhetorically querying "Have you ever seen a woman on the moon? Nono." I looked at the resident and nothing was said. Nothing. Without any prompting, the patient drove his point home, stating, "Women clean as a job." I looked at him and just waited to see whether the resident would say anything. Nothing else was said, and the man's remarks

were not acknowledged. I finished wrapping the patient's leg and left the room in silence. The resident dismissed the patient with a simple "take care." I wanted to chide with a snarky remark, but I chose not to, feeling the need to maintain my professionalism, respect, and integrity to medicine. However, later I questioned myself after this incident: Should I have said something? Why did it matter that I was a female medical student working with an Asian intern and an older Caucasian man? Should I have said women can do all and be all? I felt disrespected, and questioned if I could stick up for myself and women as a whole?

I realized after deep breathing, meditation, and a discussion with a friend, that I made the right choice. I did not argue, nor did I show anger or resentment towards the man—I did not have to. I could do as I pleased. He stated his feelings with possible expectation of a response, and I did not acknowledge him. In medicine, women face a great deal of discrimination, because for many, women are still viewed as child carriers and homeworkers, not breadwinners. I guess this view of us soothes these ignorant people for some reason, who refuse to accept the truth that we, as women, are just as strong, capable, and brilliant as men. Maybe this perception of us will never fully change, but I had the truth and righteousness of the matter on my side. I could react however I wanted to the sexist older patient or the indifferent male intern, because I knew that in that moment, I was the strong one.

The truth is from this experience I have realized although the male resident did not speak up to the patient about his comments and

neither did I; the patient had lost. The loss comes from not responding to inappropriate statements moreover giving the statement weight to us.

To build a stronger medical community, there must be an understanding that these microaggressions and biases exist. How we deal with this in the moment individually can vary, but we need to be able to acknowledge and process what happened. While I was fortunate enough to have a support system in place to help me with this, I hope that as a medical community, we can get to a place where we can address what happens within the actual workplace instead of waiting until we get home to do so. Maybe educating others about what some of us go through can also help. Ultimately, if we can generate some understanding amongst each other, we can create a greater sense of community that can address this type of harmful behavior.