

## **“I’m Older Than I Look!”**

Sometimes it’s accusatory: “You CAN’T be a pharmacist!!!” Other times, it’s endearing: “Bless your little heart. You look like my 10-year-old niece.” I can take it as a compliment when the cashier says, “May I see your ID?” or “Excuse me, are you old enough to check into a hotel?” However, when I’m at work, I associate my age with my credibility. I have spent far too many hours studying, rounding, working, and studying some more to have my credibility questioned simply because of my healthy skin.

I always think I will come back with wit and humor. When the patient says, “I swear, you cannot be a day over 11 years old,” I’ll respond, “Yes, I’m actually a pharmacy prodigy. I was reading package inserts before I was 2 years old. I matriculated at pharmacy school before I could walk.”

Or “You just look sooo young.” And my quick wit will take over with “You should have seen how young I looked before I worked here for 2 years.” (Seriously, have you ever looked at your hospital ID and thought, “I looked so much younger before I started residency!”)

Of course, we can all agree that pompous and demeaning responses do not win the trust of our patients or anyone else, for that matter.

### **The time that the shoe was on the other foot**

I was in my first year of residency. My father was admitted to the hospital for treatment of his cancer. I felt hopeless and terrified. I waited with my family (for what seemed like forever) to see my father’s physician. I presumed the physician would offer us reassurance and comfort. As my ears heard the knock on the door, my eyes awaited my father’s experienced oncologist. Instead of a white-haired, slightly disheveled scholarly yet caring physician, in walked a groomsman from a wedding that I had attended earlier that year. I looked at the medical resident with the understanding that we had been practicing medicine for the same amount of time. All of a sudden, that didn’t seem like enough time, and I felt my blood boil with panic and frustration. I thought, “How is THIS GUY going to solve any of my problems?!!” As I sat with legs crossed, arms crossed, and a slight tilt of my neck, THAT GUY explained the treatment plan. As I listened, the plan made sense; the resident displayed knowledge and sincere concern for my father. I grew to believe that my father would be provided the care that he needed.

So I can try to laugh off my patients’ comments and say, “I get that all the time,” but that does not mitigate my patients’ concerns or move the encounter into a positive direction. Instead, I have more success with directing the conversation back to the patient. When they say, “Are

you sure that you are old enough to work here?" I reply, "Yes; we aren't here to talk about me; we are here to talk about you. Tell me, how are you doing?"

I feel that acknowledging that I look young does not build anyone's confidence in my clinical skills. I think that diving straight in and addressing the patient's problems is the best way to build trust. When a patient refuses to let me shift the direction of the conversation away from my age and asks a follow-up question about my professional experience, I simply explain that I am a pharmacy fellow. I am a licensed pharmacist, and I will be working with a team of experienced providers to ensure that they will get the care that they need. I understand that I am seeing them at a time when they feel helpless or vulnerable. It is a knee-jerk reaction to wonder about my age. At the very least, I know their reflexes are working!

### **Can't win 'em all**

A couple of months ago, I was seeing a patient for the first time. As I met her in the waiting room, I gave her a strong (but not overbearing) handshake and introduced myself. She immediately said that she did not want to be seen by me and asked if she could see someone else. I told her that it was her right to see another provider but that I could not guarantee that she would be seen that day. My preceptor agreed to see the patient independently. I was relieved when my preceptor told me that these situations happen and not to take it personally. However, it was personal. I questioned my professionalism, appearance, and nonverbal communication. I don't think that I could have done anything differently, but it still stung my ego for a little while.

### **The clock is ticking...**

Right now, some of my patients might speculate on how I will manage their medical care, considering that it seems like I just learned to tie my shoes last week. However, being a resident or fellow is a quickly fleeting time. I can't believe I'm already over 2 years into my professional career. In a couple more years, I will be considered "an experienced clinician." Yikes, that sounds old! Until then, I will appreciate this part of my career, where I am constantly learning from those with more experience and of course getting to do what I love.

About the author: Courtney Slough was born at a very young age and currently resides in North Carolina. She is a connoisseur of pumpkinized coffee and blueberry doughnuts. She is recruiting a manager for her fantasy football team and hopes not to come in last place this season.