

Noises From Below

Vikram Padmanabhan

As a third-year medical student, my white coat becomes my security blanket. “Hi Brian,” I say, attempting to sound simultaneously friendly, fun, and trustworthy. (Brian is 9 years old.) Nothing. Not even a smile, a nod, a recognition of my existence. As a third-year medical student, my armamentarium for dealing with the “difficult patient” is pitifully small. Maybe I was not “fun enough.” Better yet, maybe he has hearing problems. Maybe he is having a bad day. Maybe his mother forced him to take a shower before visiting the doctor for his annual checkup. When I feel like my patient does not want me in the room, my mind begins racing. Medical students have two security blankets: their white coats and racing minds.

I attempt to fill the void of silence in the examination room: “What school do you go to? Who’s your best friend? What’s your favorite TV show? What do you do for fun?” Still no response. Brian’s eyes remain fixed on the floor. He must have found something terribly interesting in that linoleum. At least, more interesting than the white-coated stranger in front of him.

“I’m sorry, he’s really shy, and he hates doctors,” Brian’s mother

explains. I smile and breathe a sigh of relief. It isn’t me, she just told me that he hates doctors. As I proceed to get the rest of Brian’s history from his mother, Brian sat motionless on the examination table, arms crossed, waiting patiently for his annual physical to be over, still enraptured by the shiny linoleum beneath him. I turn to the sink to wash my hands. This will all be over soon, I thought.

At least he’s letting me examine him. I breathed a sigh of relief as I mentally reviewed my physical exam checklist. Head? Normocephalic, atraumatic: Check. Pupillary reflex? Check. Tympanic membranes? WNL. Check.

I began to lose myself in my racing thoughts. Why isn’t he at least acknowledging my presence? I thought I was good with kids! Am I trying too hard to be friendly? Am I smiling enough? Does Brian notice the large beads of sweat as they burst through my shiny forehead? Am I just another nameless, faceless doctor to Brian? Am I another stranger to Brian, one that makes him take his clothes off, only to poke and prod him?

I placed my stethoscope on Brian’s abdomen. “Brian, you must be really hungry.” No response. “You are making all kinds of noises under there!” A smile cracked, ultimately allowing the deluge of laughter to burst forth. “Really? Can I hear them?” With glee, Brian took my stethoscope and listened to his bow-

el sounds. “That’s my stomach!” Brian stated with authority. Brian reminded me of the first time I auscultated bowel sounds, the first time I correctly described a murmur, the first time I elicited the hepatojugular reflux. Brian reminded me that the patient-doctor relationship was truly sacred. I smiled at him, and he smiled back at me.

Brian’s laughter and voice felt like a breath of fresh air. Not only was he feeling more at ease, I was feeling more at ease. However, I soon learned, one must be careful what one wishes for: Brian could not stop talking! I soon learned that Brian was in third grade, loves art class, has a best friend named Jason, and enjoys riding his bike. Further, I noted that as we spoke, the rest of the exam became more fluid. No longer was I just going through the motions, making checks in my mental checklist. No longer were my thoughts racing. I was focused and confident. As we finished up, Brian exclaimed, “We’re done already?” My white coat felt lighter, as the weight of the security blanket lifted from my shoulders. As I smiled, I had just discovered another pearl of third-year medical school: “Be careful what you wish for.”

(Fam Med 2009;41(7):472.)

From the Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

Correspondence: Address correspondence to Mr Padmanabhan, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, 1935 Eastchester Road, 6B, Bronx, NY 10461. 718-986-1027. vpadmana@aecom.yu.edu.