



# I Guess the MD on My White Coat Is Invisible Today

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It's my first day as an attending and I'm filled with excitement.

Last night, I organized my work bag with pens, highlighters, my *Washington Manual*, *MPR*, *Pocket Medicine*, and *Drugs for Bugs* book. I ironed my clothes and pressed my white coat to perfection.

Before walking to morning report, I stop by the restroom to put on my white coat. The newly pristine white polyester and cotton is a stark contrast to my pale chestnut skin, but wow, it looks great on me! As I gaze into the mirror, the memories of the tearful and blissful moments of my medical professional journey come flooding back to me.

As I'm happily contemplating my appearance, I hear a hospital visitor spit in my direction, "That stall needs more toilet paper!" Is she talking to me?

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I leave the bathroom to meet the inpatient service team. We discuss our patients and plan of care around a large table. Now I'm off to round on my own. As I walk into the first patient's room, she is engrossed in her phone conversation until she sees my face. She quickly tells the other person on the phone, "I have to talk to you later, the lady is here to take my order." With my poised blouse, A-line skirt, black pumps, and the lack of a hairnet, I thought, "Do I really look like a cafeteria lady?"

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On to the next patient. I walk into a room filled with visitors, yet there is not a patient in the bed. A family member yells to the bathroom, "Mom, the nurse is here to see you!" When did nurses start wearing long white coats?

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The next patient's door is closed. Before knocking and entering, I pull back my black curls and snug them between a rubber band, just to make sure my curls are not covering the MD on my white coat. I open the door to see our pale-skinned medical student talking to the patient. I notice his blonde ringlets on top of his head bouncing. Just before I can introduce myself as Dr McKinney, the patient clutches my hand and exclaims, "You are so lucky to have this young man teaching you!" How did his short white coat trump my long white coat with an embroidered MD?

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Or maybe it's that my prominent and discernible African American features overshadow any embroidered white coat in which I clothe this chestnut skin I live in.

Because of having had these same experiences in medical school and residency, I enter each room as professionally as possible. I always dress the part and try to embody the

true definition of what my patients imagine a physician to be. I naively thought that things would change once I was an attending. In retrospect, I thought that things would change when I became a resident. Wow, I was definitely wrong. Over time, these situations can dismantle your confidence, and it becomes hard not to internalize these racist assumptions. It is not that I believe that I am superior to the janitor, more important than the cafeteria lady, more vital than the nurse, or more elite than the medical student, but it is gut-wrenching that because of the color of my skin, I could not possibly be the doctor.

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