

Is There a Black Doctor in the House?

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“I’m not taking orders from any White people!” screamed the Black man in the room down the hall from me.

His retort was heard by nearly everyone in the mostly empty emergency department. I swiveled in my chair and shared a surprised glance with my colleagues working the night shift, all of whom were White. As a family medicine resident working in the ED, I was accustomed to loud demands, but these seemed harsh in juxtaposition to the dimly lit physician pod area just past midnight.

I stood up and turned my attention to the patient’s room with the soft yellow light pouring through the open door.

“Is everything all right?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think he’s just drunk,” said the officer in the corner of the room.

I noticed the cold steel handcuffs rattling against the bed railing as the patient adjusted himself to speak with me.

“Are you in charge here?” he shouted.

I looked back at my attending.

“If you can convince him to get a head CT, go for it,” she whispered.

“Yes, I am,” I replied to the patient, noticing that I was the only Black person in the ED who wasn’t a patient.

“You can’t keep screaming like this and expect people to be able to help you,” I continued.

Looking much more relaxed in his belief that a Black man was in charge, he explained that he had fallen earlier in the night and hit his head and needed help. In between receiving care from emergency services and arriving at the hospital, he was arrested by the police. No matter the reason for his arrest, a head CT was needed to rule out any acute findings so he could be on his way.

“If I ask the officer to uncuff you and we go to the CT scanner, will you sit still and let us treat you?”

The patient thought for a moment and said, “As long as you’re in charge and there are no White people telling me what to do.”

The police officer and I breathed a sigh of relief as we wheeled him down the hall toward the CT scanner.

“Negative,” my attending said after scrolling through the images.

“Putting in the discharge orders now,” I replied.

As he was wheeled to the police car, I wondered why he felt the way he did. Of course, alcohol can make a person say unfiltered things, but I couldn’t help but imagine what he had been through in his life, in health care, and in the criminal justice system that led him to distrust White people. I wondered what would have been the outcome had I not been there that night. Would he have harmed an employee or even himself?

When at work, I rarely think about the color of my skin. This encounter showed me the value that I bring just by being myself. As the lone Black male physician in the ED at that

time, I was the one he would consider listening to. I felt relief that I was able to deescalate the situation and provide the care he deserved. That day I showed up to work as an off-service PGY2 with the expectation to assist the team. Instead, the color of my skin led me to supervise the care of a high-risk patient I wouldn't typically be asked to see. Because I am Black, at times I am responsible in a way that my coresidents are never expected to be. This unspoken pressure adds to the fatigue of every shift. It is not my fault that this responsibility exists, but it is a burden I carry nonetheless.

When you think of a physician, who do you imagine walking into the room? Regardless, for the time being, there is a Black doctor in the house.

Author Note: Dr Ukadike was a family medicine resident when these events occurred. After graduating and earning his family medicine certification, he began his current residency program in emergency medicine.