Surgical Peacocks

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I am in New Jersey at the New York General Surgery board review course (time to re-certify already!). It is an intense, one-week, extravaganza so chock full of information you once knew (before you went into private practice) that your mind wanders from time to time (as is evidenced by the fact that I came up with this column during the first day of the course). I couldn't help but laugh as my habit of "people-watching" brought me back to my childhood days, when the whole family would gather on a Sunday night to watch a new episode of Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom.

I arrived at my hotel on Sunday night, before the conference started on Monday, to see the swarm of "surgical peacocks" already developing around the registration table. These peacocks can be found, proudly wearing their name badges in such non-medical locations as: the hotel lobby, the hotel bar, or the nearby Applebee's. This behavior is mostly seen in the male of the species, as the females rarely puff up their feathers in public. In their home territory, the male surgical peacock need not fear a lack of recognition, as he has established his territory over the years and is rarely addressed by any title other than "doctor". Out of his home territory, however, this recognition is lacking; therefore, there is an obvious need for clear labeling in all public venues to achieve the necessary level of respect that the male surgical peacock requires.

Once in the lecture hall, both male and female surgical peacocks demonstrate a "territorial marking" of their chosen seat by spreading out various personal items such as sweaters, binders, and computer paraphernalia. All nearby pens, notepads, and jars of candies are hoarded leaving the stragglers with nothing but an empty seat, and a disapproving glance from the person they sit next to (who inevitably

feels overcrowded by the latecomer). The chosen seat will be guarded during meals, and an invisible "reserved" sign will be placed there for the remaining days of the conference. Should a newcomer sit in a previously claimed seat, you can see the ousted peacock dance around the lost trophy, heaving sighs of disgust and squawking loudly to those nearby about his long-lost prior place of residence.

In between lectures, the surgical peacocks gather at the watering hole where the pecking order is determined. In the general public, by nature of their advanced degree, the average surgical peacock holds a higher rank in society than most of those around them. At this gathering however, they are surrounded by similar peacocks, so they perform a ritual called "One-uppance". This is where, instead of friendly conversation, the peacocks will launch straight into a review of their credentials, including everything from medical school to fellowships. Their sparring partner will then reciprocate by listing his or her own credentials. The one with the most prestigious training wins that round and then moves on to another challenger. The only attendees that refrain from this activity (and also tend to not wear their "badges of honor") are the faculty. The faculty are the "Lion Kings" of this pride. They are frequently pawed at during the breaks by adoring fans that vie for their attention by striving to come up with the "brilliant question" or astounding patient anecdotal story to invoke a positive reaction from their idol.

Around midday comes the feeding frenzy. The doors to the complimentary dining room are flung open, and a stampede of seemingly starving surgical peacocks plows through the door pillaging the booty like pirates of the Caribbean. After lunch, the surgical peacocks flock around the "Tree of Knowledge" (also known as the book vendor's table), plucking the choice volumes before the tree is bare. Once again, the stragglers are left to place their orders in hopes that the knowledge will be delivered to them …. someday. It just goes to show that the early bird gets the worm.

I have never considered myself a true "surgical peacock". Instead of strutting badges and MD's, I tend to strut my Badgley Mischkas. I am content to be a Jane Goodall of sorts that goes through the motions to better understand the species, but never really quite fit in. Yet, tomorrow is another days, so … let the games begin!

What's your take? E-mail zoedeol@msn.com [1]

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