

Thanks For The Compliment, But I'm Not A Nurse

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Let's get one thing clear from the start: I love nurses. My grandmother was a nurse's aide. My aunt is a nurse. My mother is a nurse. Nurses have been by my side for the most frightening and important experiences in my life (in the hospital and out). However, I'm not a nurse. I'm a doctor. And when someone calls me nurse, I hate it.

Here's why:

1. I hate being called "nurse," because I feel like it undoes the work of thousands of female physicians before me.

Recently, I was on service with one of the most accomplished female physicians at my institution. Our first patient welcomed us into his room with this: "Can I call you back? The nurses want to talk to me about something."

One hundred and fifty-four years ago, he would have certainly been correct. However, in 1849, Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to receive a medical degree in the U.S. Hundreds of thousands of female medical school graduates later, women are now poised to outnumber their male colleagues by 2017. Still, I can't say I feel secure in my place as a female physician. We are still underpaid and under-promoted compared to our male colleagues. To me, it feels like we've just splintered the shell of this previously male-dominated field. Being called "nurse" reminds me of the enormous gender gap I have yet to cross. Overpowering gender stereotypes will take more than outnumbering the men in our field.

Back in my patient's room, I crafted a response in my head.

"Haven't you heard of Anna Howard Shaw? Jocelyn Elders? Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman? We are your doctors, and we are women! Hear us roar!"

Luckily, before I spoke, my attending simply rolled her eyes and gracefully continued with rounds.

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