

Shopping for seniority

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Imagine your last shift in the emergency room, with nurses and physicians scrambling through hallways filled with stretchers. People sprawled upon thin, uncomfortable beds and packed into corners. The overhead pager system incessantly spewing out messages for the head nurse or Drs. X, Y and Z. Beeps and buzzes of electronic machinery. It's like watching the cacophony of lunch hour activity at McDonald's. The only difference is that emergency department (ED) clients have to wait 5 to 7 hours to get their Big Mac. I suppose that is why patients look with disdain at the young person who pops up from behind the curtain, all smiles, and introduces himself as "the physician."

In the movie *As Good As It Gets*, Helen Hunt complains about the HMO physicians she sees in the emergency room — the 9-year-old "doctor du jour" that just graduated from medical school. The older, wiser, and — yes — richer, physician smiles understandingly.

I am that younger physician. The one running around the ED looking barely older than 20. In fact I am 30, but the majority of patients I see in the emergency room feel compelled to express their anxiety about my youthful appearance. "You look too young to be a doctor," they say, hoping their words will result in some self-fulfill-

ing prophecy that will magically transform me into the "old boy du jour." It adds up to 160 comments about my age per week, 640 per month and 7680 comments per year.

My sister suggested I have a series of name tags ordered. Identification buttons that answer those inevitable questions: "Yes, I am your doctor," "Yes, I have done this before" and "Yes, I am licensed to practise medicine."

"Have you done stitches before?" "I lost count after a hundred; that was a long time ago."

My male colleagues have a ready-made solution: they grow a beard. Dr. James Barry, a physician in the British Army, did so and concealed her sex until she died in 1865. I'm sure history contains an exhaustive list of additional examples of people who have gone to great lengths to gain client respect. Over a century later I just did not want to be one of those people.

I was willing to make some concessions, and decided to try make-up. As an outdoors/adventure type, make-up just never made sense to me and I've never worn much. I hate the marks lipstick leaves on my coffee cup. Flecks of mascara inch their way behind my contact lenses and irritate my eyes. However, something had to be done.

As soon as I walked into the department store I was greeted by 15 different booths, with a hundred women standing in stiletto heels, all looking like they suffer from Graves' disease. It reminded me of the haunted house at the exhibition when I was a kid. You never knew when someone would reach out with bony fingers and grab you. Clinique, Elizabeth Arden, Lancome, I got so flustered I didn't know

what to do. I chose Lancome because I liked Isabella Rossellini's mother in *Casablanca*, and the lady behind the counter was busy with someone else. She zipped right over when she saw me looking through the glass though, her big white teeth



grinning only inches from my own.

"What can I do for you, dear?"

"Uh... I just need some eyeliner."

"Sure thing, darling. Which kind would you like?" Her bony hand and red satin painted claws swept over to a display of fifty long black tubes.

"Mmmm, I don't know, black... waterproof, yeah that's it, I would like a waterproof, black eyeliner."

"Well sure sweetie, but would you like sculpting eyeliner, defining eyeliner, eyeliner/mascara that elongates the lash?"

I broke out into a cold sweat. "I don't know. Whatever you suggest."

Hamilton, Ont.

“Well this one is just perfect for you. If you buy something else you can get a free make-up bag filled with a host of essential items. I notice you have a very pale complexion; this ruddy facial cleaner will perk those cheeks right up.”

Well, if I hadn't been self-conscious before, I sure was now. “No, thank you, I just want some eyeliner.”

“You know you could really use some lipstick.”

“Fine. Just give me the eyeliner, lipstick and the freebie, I really have to go.”

“Well maybe if you have more time

tomorrow you could come back and I could give you a full make-over.”

“Yeah, I'll be sure to do that.”

I ran full speed to the nearest exit, nearly taking out an old lady trying to purchase some poofy pink Isotoner slippers and anti-wrinkle cream. She just shook her head and made some comment about the youth of today.

I wore the make-up for a week but the only effect this had, aside from requiring that I get up 5 minutes earlier, was that two (not so) young men whom I saw in the ED left their phone numbers with the receptionist. They came to emergency because

they had broken bones and, somewhere along the way, it occurred to them that, “Hey, maybe I could get a date out of this.”

Dowdy, ill-fitting clothing may be the next step. Then again, perhaps those name tags will do the trick. It's true I look too young to be a physician, but I'm a good one. Given the mass exodus of our colleagues to the south, the next time a patient remarks that they thought I was the candy stripper I might respond that it's a wonder there is a physician here at all.

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