

Insights from the other side

Leandra Stringer

Western University, London, ON, Canada

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I get it. I understand. I have looked behind the veil of separation that keeps us from them.

Mother, doctor. I flip-flop between the two as I sit in a foreign waiting room I've walked past hundreds of times before.

Years ago, I walked these halls as a surgical resident. He was still just a want in our minds — a plan, a dream, a wish. I showed up early, made a good impression, eager to earn a spot in a coveted fellowship.

Running lists of patients, reviewing with fellows and staff.

Seeing patients, from a comfortable distance both physically and emotionally.

Seeing parents of complex kids and thinking how difficult that must be. How sad for *them*.

Now, we sit, we wait — on the other side. Surrounded by other worried parents.

I feel this room. It has presence. A heaviness, a sadness. Nobody wants to be here. Every person who walks past the door has a weight on my heart. I check. Is that his doctor? Is he ok? What did they find?

The surgeons come in; they pull the parents aside. The parents return. Some, relieved. Some, have a sadness the rest of us feel. We look away. Don't look — don't let it touch you. As if, by even feeling some small part of it, it could spread to our precious little one. I have been that doctor, nonchalantly walking in, recounting details of the surgery, unaware of the impact our words have.

I realize now, it isn't about the OR. We are telling these parents if their lives are about to change forever, if they are about to join the club of parents who grieve normalcy, who wish their worries were of meal plans, daycare spots, and vacation plans. Instead, these parents, catapulted by a few sentences from

our very own mouths, will now worry about things no parents should have to.

Will my child see? Will this continue to progress? Will there be more surgery? Will we need to move? Will I need to quit my job? Will my child develop? Will they speak? Will they grow? Will they need more tests? Will it hurt?

As a doctor, I had no clue of the grief and worry in this room. No concept of the lives that we change.

Now, we show up early. Running lists of questions for his doctors, discussing what their findings mean for my kid, for our life, for our future.

I am the parent with all the questions, waiting with all the other parents. We fear for our babies. Taken from our arms, crying, and brought into cold rooms with unfamiliar smells. IVs are poked into their chubby hands, and we see the marks from all the attempts that did not go — a story of a place where I cannot be with my baby to comfort him, but I so often stand, in juxtaposition, comforting other people's children.

I am no longer just the surgical resident.

I get it now. I see them. I am them. I know what it takes. I know a fraction of how it feels. I walk this line between doctor and mom, and I am better now than I was before. Living behind the barrier we place between us and our patients has moved me to connect and understand my patients in ways I could not have imagined. It will make me a better doctor, a stronger surgeon.

Now, when I walk into that room as a doctor, I know they are not difficult. They are not crazy. They have the ultimate responsibility of caring for and loving a medically complex child. I hold space. I take time. I ask if there are any other questions. I know how precious the minutes they have with their care team are. I understand the stress of advocating, checking, arranging, booking, and scheduling. But above all, I understand the love.

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