

Untarnished

By Ali Rizvi

“Do you abuse your wife?”

I was finishing the electronic health record entry at the end of a 30-minute office visit and was about to pick up the laptop to exit the exam room. The unusual, unexpected question from the patient caught me completely off-guard. *I think he is trying to be humorous*, I thought to myself.

Unsure of what he meant, I hesitated in replying. “Ahmm....what do you mean, Mr. H?” I asked. He repeated the question with a louder enunciation and prolonged emphasis on *ABU-U-USE*.

“Nowadays one hears so much about these Moslem men abusing their wives and children” he added, as if attempting to explain the reason behind his inquiry to be a rather genuine curiosity stemming from his limited understanding of prevailing notions and assumptions.

“Well, what has that got to do with me?” I retorted, implying that perhaps I wasn't really Muslim. Imaginably my initial knee-jerk reaction was to bring to my defense my own convictions (or lack of them) as a self-styled agnostic and free-thinker, therefore implying apologetically *“that may be true, but you've got the wrong guy.”* (Hindsight note to self: My appropriate response should have been “Mr. H, I don't think it is appropriate to discuss such matters during a medical office visit. Why don't we focus today on how we can improve your diabetes management?” Or perhaps, without being defensive, engage with him more and explore where he was coming from).

Before I could think of anything further, Mr. H immediately responded with a follow up question. “But I thought you had mentioned once that you *were Muslim...*”

I don't know where he is going with this, I thought to myself, getting a little uncomfortable with his line of questioning and still looking for a suitable way of handling the situation. I had no recollection of ever discussing my religious beliefs with Mr. H, but evidently he thought otherwise.

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A flurry of confusing thoughts drifted through my mind: This patient had driven 99 miles each way to see me for over a decade, so I'm sure he must like me as his doctor, *right?* He was just being inquisitive—I'm sure my background or origin didn't matter to him, he knew I was a good doctor, and his curiosity was getting the best of him...he was probably just getting swept away by what he encountered in the news and discussions on TV, *etc.*—besides, I couldn't

recall ever discussing my ethnicity or affiliation with any of my patients, especially since I considered myself lacking any strong traditional beliefs.

My besieged brain, trying to fend off this onslaught of guilt-by-association, kept trying to come up with answers to exculpate and distance myself from my background. Gazing at the floor to try to convey an erudite and philosophical air, I answered rather deliberately, "Well, see, I was born to parents who were Muslim, but that doesn't mean that I follow the same... ahmmm ... I mean..." I could sense my answer deteriorating into a cowering and unintelligible blabber. Primitive defense mechanisms starting operations in my head. *Still not being able to summon the courage? You need to put Mr. H in his place! Like, shut up, you bigot! Why are suddenly asking me all these questions?*

Of course, I said no such thing.

Instead, reaching for the doorknob and, anxious to end this uncomfortable conversation, I fled from the examination room to the security of the nursing station.

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Well, what *are* you, then? It was beginning to feel like an interrogation.

I released a long sigh and tried to collect myself for a moment. Not wanting to ignore or evade the patient's questioning any longer, I turned around to face Mr. H, this time staring directly at him. He had been almost motionless this entire time, sitting smugly in his chair with his legs outstretched in front of him and his hands clasped over his abdomen. I sat down, drew my swivel stool closer to him, and rested my chin on both hands. "Mr. H, I'm just a human being trying to do the best I can for you."

Evidently, Mr. H was not done yet. "So you're not a *jibadi* who wants to kill people and blow up buildings?" His eyebrows furrowed a little as he asked the question, and the corners of his mouth pulled up slightly, as if his face was trying to break into an imperceptible and wry smirk.

Does he really mean that? I thought. *Is he serious or is he trying to be sarcastic and funny?* After all, it does appear to be "open season," and he could conceivably get away with either intention without getting called out by the wizards of political correctness. *Has his perception of me changed overnight from a competent, caring and trustworthy physician of the last 10 years, to a bloodthirsty, ideology-driven and brainwashed criminal?* Worse, being utterly unprepared for this relentless assault, I had unwittingly gone into a defense mode (*it's okay for you to suspect me, but I'm not really one of those people*). In the court of Mr. H's opinion, his own clinician and a well-respected academician had to prove himself as a citizen in good standing. *But surely this was not like Mr. H,* I thought—an educated "gentleman" who was always well-dressed, civil and courteous.

"I don't know. I'm just a human being who is trying to do his best, Mr H..." was all I could muster. I smiled softly at him and stepped out of the room.

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I could not get the interaction with Mr. H out of my mind during the rest of the day. Driving back home, I decided to stop and swim a few laps at my local YMCA. It gave me some time to recoil from and reflect on the experience, while struggling with what, if anything, to do next.

That night I addressed the following letter to the patient:

Dear Mr. H,

This letter is in regard to your office visit on January 6. We discussed management of your diabetes, and I gave you additional written suggestions for improving your glucose level and general health.

However, because of comments that came from you at the end of the visit, which were directed to me personally and were unrelated to your medical care, I feel that a healthy patient-physician relationship cannot continue. Therefore, this letter serves notice that my office has decided to terminate provision of healthcare to you. We will continue to provide the usual services to you for one month from your receiving this note, or until you are transferred into the care of another physician for the medical issues our office has helped you with.

The nature and contents of your remarks that have caused me to make this decision have not been documented in your medical record or elsewhere. They have not been brought to the knowledge of any other person. They remain confidential, and my preference is to maintain privacy unless their revelation becomes necessary or inevitable.

I wish you good health in the future.

The next morning, my secretary typed up the letter and placed it in the “inbox” for my signature.

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Over the next two weeks I took care of all sorts of paperwork—refill authorizations, notes from other physicians, laboratory results—the “stuff” that a clinician normally encounters in a busy medical practice. During all that time, Mr. H’s letter sat in the inbox while the rest of the paperwork came and went. I would glance at it, only to pick it up and put it back down.

One morning in the clinic, while I was finishing up seeing a patient and was about to go into the next examination room, the nurse pulled me aside and said, “Mr. H’s wife called. He started having abdominal pains 3 days ago and they had to admit him to the hospital. He is passing blood in his stool. They think he might have diverticulitis. His sugars have been running high and they want to adjust his insulin regimen. He is telling them he already has a diabetes doctor and is refusing to make any changes unless they run it by you first. He wants you to call him.”

My mind wandered to our conversation at the end of his last office visit. “Okay...tell Mrs. H I will call within the next hour.” I replied. “Also, I will need to see him for a follow-up appointment within a week after he leaves the hospital,” I added with a little hesitation.

Back at my desk at the end of the day, as I was finishing paper work, my eyes fell on the letter I had written to Mr. H two weeks ago. It was still lying on my desk to be mailed out. I started thinking about my conversation with his wife earlier in the day, and how she was so distraught—and yet so uplifting for me. “He has been asking for you every day he has been in the hospital. Doctor Rizvi, you know he just doesn’t trust anyone else but you when it comes to his sugars,” she had said. “Remember when you talked to his family doc about getting him a stress test? He thinks you saved his life. He says you’re the only doctor who calls him at home to discuss his test results. You’ve helped him so much over the years...he sings yours praises all the time!”

I could not wrap my head around what Mr. H had been saying to his wife about me, especially in view of how his line of questioning had been during his last office visit. *He was confused when he saw me*, I thought to myself. *Perhaps he was only responding to what the media and “opinion pundits” were feeding him—and struggling with categorizing and stereotyping all human beings, including his physician.* We were obviously failing as a society in this respect, and he was one of the victims. Seeds of hatred and division were being sowed. A sacred doctor-patient relationship—and many other bonds in our communities—was being destroyed. I sat back in my chair and thought *It was okay to understand and forgive.* As his healer, my sense of commitment for Mr. H’s welfare took precedence over any feelings of anger and resentment, however justifiable, I was harboring. I had the option to ignore and move on.

At that moment, I picked up the letter I had written to Mr. H and glanced at it for a split second. Then I ran it through the shredder.

Ali Rizvi was born and raised in Pakistan. After completing medical school, he came to the United States for medical training and has lived here for the past 30 years. Most of his career has been spent in academic medicine - patient care, teaching, research, and administration. He is currently affiliated with Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta in the practice of Endocrinology. Rizvi likes to run, hike, read, write and travel in his spare time. His non-fiction essay “Untarnished” appears in the Fall 2020 *Intima*.

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