Dr. Wells' Curbside Consult: Guess My Profession

By Jamie Wells, M.D. — November 30, 2016

Watching the jaw drop or tug-of-war facial reaction battle of another person when they discover my educational and career endeavors is so uniformly commonplace that I would be hard pressed to come up with a day let alone a week where such an occurrence didn’t take place.

Apparently, I don’t look like a doctor.

Earlier today the waiter at lunch was first speechless then over-complimenting once it sunk in how dramatic his response was to the news that not only was I one, but I was not fresh in or out of training and had dabbled in the possibility of brain surgery as my chosen vocation.

Typecasting by others or the insistence on attempting to place me in a box is the story of my life. I always joke I am like Rodney Dangerfield, “I just get no respect.” Though comparisons to the “Legally Blonde” character tend frequently to head my way. I actually appreciate that one as she was always kind to others no matter how poorly she was treated and her surprise factor was thoroughly enjoyable.

The shock and disbelief behind this reality is why I wanted to explore it a bit further if for no other reason than just to acknowledge how we all shortchange ourselves when we try to limit another’s value by assumptions, quick judgements and subsequent unceremonious dismissals. Especially ones based on physicality.

Surprisingly, when I went out for coed football in Central Park I was picked last. And, of course, no one was assigned to cover me. What does one do? Ummm, had to get four touchdowns. Couldn’t help myself. Lesson learned.

A few weeks ago while on a work trip I got into a conversation with a thirty-something male attorney who asked what I did. I told him I recently started as the Director of Medicine for the American Council on Science and Health. To which he responded, “don’t you need to be a doctor
for that?" "Yes," I said. "No, no, I mean like an actual medical doctor?," he maintained.

Labels hold no appeal to me. Genderism. Ageism. Heightism. Personalityism. I am simply numb to the ‘isms.’ They are cumulatively exhausting.

In childhood, I did calculus problems with my grandfather at a very young age and was encouraged to see opportunity, not obstacle. Became a mathlete. Right triangle trophies, the works. In third grade, I was doing sixth grade math. Upon transferring to a new school, they did not believe a girl could perform at that level so they insisted on getting me independently tested. For hours on end - or, at least that’s my memory. The results conveyed my work was at the ninth grade level.

It has always been my nature to make the best of circumstances, find the joy in situations and look for the good in others. As a teen in math camp, being bubbly seemed to undermine my capabilities and I overheard fellow campers discussing whether or not I was “a quota.” Evidently, a big-haired, outgoing Jersey girl was in high demand that year. This, of course, instantaneously and miraculously vanished once I did a math problem no one else could do.

The stakes of this stereotyping merely escalated in adulthood. When I applied for my first residency in neurosurgery, my interviews were consumed by “you have your hair down and make up on are you a princess?” or “we don’t want a woman” to being threatened, harassed and romantically pursued. No one took me to strip clubs or gave me cigars like some of the male applicants. At the time, I was told I was the only female in the northeast who applied.

Switching to pediatrics, I naively envisioned a profound shift. But, alas, I experienced contract negotiations that would involve “why don’t you just find a nice guy to get married, you don’t want this stress” or “I always thought so-and-so would open a practice for you” as a means to deflect from paying a woman less.

We have observed the viral hashtags of #ilooklikeascientist or #ilooklikeadoctor or #ilooklikeanengineer because these scenarios abound. I would urge a collective shift to #ilooklikemylimitlessdreams or #ilooklikeanintelligentperson and whatever that is for you to define.

Last month, we read about a woman who faced resistance to acceptance of her being a doctor during a mid-flight medical emergency. This disbelief prompted delayed care. So, a tangible result. I wish it was a unique event, but this happened to me on a flight a few years ago as well.

I think back to how as a younger woman I would be so impacted by these situations — and, I am only listing a fraction. I would take them so personally and be upset. Wondering why I couldn’t have one encounter where it was simply assumed I would be the one to be able to resuscitate a person or speak intelligently on a topic.

This is why data on gender bias or the like is empirically flawed. None of what I have conveyed would be reflected in any metric. Stating the number of female executives does not tell an entire, complete or accurate picture.

My grandfather always said, “Youth is wasted on the young.” I laugh now because somewhere along the way —after successfully jumping over enough hurdles to satisfy the conformity or
established parameters or proven myself repeatedly—I hit my threshold. Clearly, I was a slow learner given it only took me years and years to get there.

But, the epiphany did come: No one can ever limit you, but you. Shifting and reframing my own thinking allowed for liberation. I have never been a woe-as-me or victim-mentality-endorser as we all face our own share of adversity—many in a much more unimaginable realm than anything I have endured—and I am grateful to these experiences for allowing me to acquire resilience, inner fortitude and an ability to grow and evolve.

Adversity like accolades and blunders all help shape who we are in an extraordinary way.

Shocking people is genuinely enjoyable to me now. Having practiced medicine the majority of my adult life has been a real gift. Being immersed in human suffering and life-death situations provided me such a perspective on what is important.

Muting my spirit to fit some preconceived mold is not on my agenda ever again or any time soon. Spreading the word that people are complex and dynamic is. Silliness does not preclude an ability to be serious. And, vice versa.

Finding the humor in most situations provides a lot more peace and optimism for the future. Or, has for me. I have also found such wisdom in the most unexpected places.

My goal in the latest “Dr. Wells’ Curbside Consult: Guess My Profession” man-on-the-street video [1] was merely to challenge judging a book by its cover and possibly have people stop and think. But, I learned so much more from the public in the process. Each person I spoke with brought such astuteness, common sense, and well-intentioned goodness to the table.

Flipping something on its head might be the optimal way to embrace it and reduce a negative meaning or significance; for, why do I even want to look like a doctor if the image is a staid, uninspired one? As the insightful Eagles-friendly gentleman in the video concluded, “you don’t have to look like a doctor to be one.” Drop the mic.