

Pride, Prejudice, and Professionalism

By Grace M. White, PT, DPT

*Congratulations to Georgia State University Physical Therapy Program graduate Grace M. White, PT, DPT, a finalist of the annual physical therapy student essay contest co-sponsored by the ACAPT Consortium for the Humanities, Ethics, and Professionalism (CHEP) and the Journal of Humanities in Rehabilitation. This writing competition is designed to encourage deep thinking by students about the role and value of humanities, ethics, and professionalism in academic training and professional life. The third in an annual series, the CHEP-JHR essay contest offers a creative opportunity to ignite critical reflection in PT students across the nation, to support holistic approaches to patient care. This year's essay prompt was, "As healthcare professionals, working closely with patients, families, and colleagues offers opportunities for meaningful connection. However, challenges may arise when we encounter perspectives, values, priorities, and communication styles different from our own. Describe a time when you were challenged in such a way, and how you responded." In this essay, "**Pride, Prejudice, and Professionalism**," Dr. White relates how she used patience, insight, and a clever strategy to overcome her patient's sexist bias against her and deliver his treatment.*

Pride, Prejudice, and Professionalism

"Women can't be doctors; that's just asking too much of them." The words echoed as I opened the door to leave my patient's room. I was three weeks into my clinical rotation at an assisted living facility when I met

Earle.* In the weeks prior to this visit, I had become well-acquainted with most of the residents, staff, and family members at the facility. I had learned that Earle was a particularly difficult man to be around. Aside from making inappropriate comments, he was rude and pugnacious toward the staff, primarily the female healthcare providers. So, when I saw his name appear on the schedule, I knew his would be a difficult case. Earle was referred to physical therapy for muscular weakness and difficulty with ambulation.

CHALLENGE

The first time I stepped into Earle's room, I was met with an exasperated sigh laced with disapproval. Before I finished introducing myself, he interjected, "With how complex the medical field is today, I'm surprised to see a girl pursuing a doctorate degree." I tried to reason with him to no avail. I explained the rigor of my curriculum, the pre-requisites, and told him I was just as capable as all my fellow classmates, men and women alike.

Throughout the evaluation, he scoffed, made verbal jabs, and by the end refused to do anything more with me. He told me this was a waste of time; that he "would be ready when they send in a 'real' doctor." I assumed he meant a male. He cut the session short and sent me

away. I felt angry and defeated. As the oldest of three daughters, in a family with a fiercely strong mother and one in which “feminist” was a word used proudly, tolerating discrimination for being a woman was unacceptable. I was ashamed that I had let this man get to me. But something about this session and this patient struck me in a way I wasn’t expecting, and I found it increasingly difficult to shrug off his sexist commentary.

RESPONSE

Rather than fight his glaringly stubborn mindset, I decided I would prove to Earle how capable I was in a different way: by helping him. After discussing the case with my male clinical instructor, we agreed that I would come up with a plan of care for Earle that my CI would implement. The next day, we met with Earle and as my CI began to take him through the exercises I planned, Earle followed—willingly and zealously—all the while ignoring me. We continued like this for a few weeks. I observed and assessed, adapting his treatment accordingly, and Earle rapidly improved.

Eventually, my CI told Earle that I was the one who designed his plan of care. He skipped his next three sessions. I began to think he wasn’t going to come back to physical therapy.

RESOLUTION

However, the following Friday, Earle stopped me in the hall and asked me a question about his back pain. It wasn’t an apology, but I knew he was extending an olive branch. He started coming to physical therapy

again. At first, he was reluctant to take instructions from me—occasionally making an offensive remark—but eventually, he came around. It was by no means perfect, but we worked within a distinctly authentic dynamic. Our relationship was like pulling on opposite ends of a rope, but somehow meeting in the middle, compromising enough to achieve his goals during these sessions.

REFLECTION

I think back to Earle often, particularly when I am facing a patient, classmate, or co-worker with a conflicting viewpoint. I reflect on the feelings of defeat and anger I experienced with Earle, but also on the moment when I realized I needed to reconcile my own feelings with my professional duty in treating a patient. We often don’t realize how deeply we hold certain truths, values, or beliefs until they are challenged by others. This experience showed me how much patience and practice it takes to navigate these circumstances, especially when caught off-guard.

It was not easy to ignore Earle’s unfounded prejudice toward me, but I knew that arguing with this man, acting unprofessionally, and ultimately not delivering the care I knew I was capable of, would only confirm his preconceived bias. Although we held vastly different beliefs, I provided the best care I possibly could. Instead of fighting with Earle, I chose to fight for him.

*Name has been changed.

About the Author



Dr. Grace White is a Physical Therapist at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. She graduated from the University of Georgia with a B.S. Ed. Degree in Exercise and Sport Science in 2017 and from Georgia State University in 2020, where she earned her Doctorate in Physical Therapy. She was recently inducted into the National PT Student Honor Society as well as the Alpha Eta Allied Health Honor Society. Dr. White was heavily involved with research in GSU's Biomechanics lab and was selected to present as a platform speaker at APTA's CSM 2020 conference in Denver, Colorado. She also received GSU's DPT 2020 Research Award at graduation. Alongside research, Dr. White also values community service, organizing several fall risk screens for older adults, tutoring refugee students at Clarkston High School, and assisting in Parkinson's Disease boxing classes throughout her time in GSU's DPT program. During her undergraduate career, Dr. White discovered a passion for the humanities and social justice regarding the health disparities within her community. She developed a strong desire to help break down barriers to facilitate accessibility to healthcare, particularly physical therapy services. She has become increasingly active within local and national organizations including PTAG and APTA, advocating for the profession and equity in healthcare. She was awarded The Georgia Foundation for Physical Therapy Scholarship in 2019. Dr. White enjoys spending her free time outdoors which she integrates into her career by promoting a healthy lifestyle and physical activity in her patients.