

Office Visit

By Michele L. Mekel, JD, MHA, MBA

Fifty, fat, female,
and well-inked,
I sat in the exam room, waiting.

Gruff and grumpy,
the grizzled white coat
entered brusquely.

With a glance in my direction,
he made his diagnosis—
but not of my condition.

Rather,
of me:
Dismissible.

Taking my history,
he asked, pro forma,
what I did.

Lawyer.
Bioethicist.
Professor.

Full stop.
He looked up at me, baffled,
questioning his social heuristics.

How many?
When was your first?
Do you expect to get more?

Unspoken in his words,
yet clearly stated
on his face with incredulity:

How come?
Why on earth?
What were you thinking?

Migraines.
I reminded him.
That's why I'm here.

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JHR Insight

We were struck by the parallels to rehabilitation that this moving poem contains. We asked the poet Michele Mekel to expand on the ramifications of a practitioner's attitude on a patient's rehabilitation. Her thoughts:

“Hewn closely to a personal patient experience, this poem, Office Visit, cautions rehabilitation providers (and, really, all providers and all people in general) against snap judgments and biases based on external appearances. Seeing each patient—beyond their presentation and beyond their symptoms—as a unique

individual with the same core human needs and desires that we all share enables not only good and ethical care but also good and ethical interactions.

“Nevertheless, this is not as easy as it sounds, especially when harried and hurried amid the machinations of daily practice. Yet, it is imperative to intentionally stop and appreciate each patient as an embodiment of humanity—rather than as a series of diagnoses and treatments, or as an amalgam of physical, psychological, and socioeconomic characteristics. In making ourselves really embrace patients as individuals, we are forced to acknowledge and eliminate our biases, including those that have been previously hidden even from ourselves.

“Afterall, it is our shared humanity, instead of our differences, that underscores our connection—clinical and otherwise.”

About the Author



Michele L. Mekel, JD, MHA, MBA is the interim director of the intercollege Bioethics Program at The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State). She is also a teaching professor of Bioethics and an affiliate faculty member of Penn State Law and the Rock Ethics Institute, as well as being jointly appointed to the Humanities Department of the Penn State College of Medicine. Additionally, she serves as co-principal investigator of the [Viral Imaginations: COVID-19](http://viraliminations.psu.edu) project (viraliminations.psu.edu). Mekel attended the University of Missouri–Columbia, where she earned Bachelor of Journalism, Master of Business Administration, and Master of Health Care Administration degrees, and a Juris Doctor degree. Her creative writing has appeared in numerous publications and on platforms, including being featured in Garrison Keillor's *The Writer's Almanac*, being nominated for Best of the Net, and being translated into Cherokee.