

How to conform on the wards: six guidelines for the “eccentric” medical student

1. Do not question the ideas of your superiors—they truly know you best.
An attending physician once referred me to as a coconut. My initial reaction was to assume that this meant I appeared to be hollow and full of milk. My face likely mirrored my thoughts and the physician offered up what he presumed to be a thoughtful explanation: “you are brown on the outside and white on the inside.” How kind of this older gentleman to summarize my cultural and ethnic identity for me so clearly and simply.
2. You should respond when referred to as literally *anything*.
“This is...mhmhhh” will often be what you hear when entering a room with an attending physician you have been working with for over 3 weeks. It will appear they are straining to release a bowel movement, but they are in fact straining to remember your name. Do not take offense. This is a moment to be cherished as you have now established yourself above being ignored.
3. Ready your response about where you are *from*...from...
A single ‘from’ does not quite do it when interacting with physicians and patients as a medical student. The second ‘from’ really does say it all. A few places you are not from: Iowa, America, outer space.
4. Read peoples’ minds, not their words.
This is of utmost importance during all rotations, but primarily while in the operating room. Someone may say “please hold this” but what they are thinking is “if you don’t hold this with exactly 9N of force I will berate you in front of everyone in this room until you are crying under your tiny mask”. If you cry in the OR people will not show you empathy with their words or their actions and you will again be required to read peoples minds in order to experience said empathy.
5. You love Neurology, you just don’t know it yet.
Let’s say (hypothetically) that you are on your neurology rotation, and you are the only female. If this is (hypothetically) the case, you can expect this fact to be pointed out on an hourly basis. If this constant reminder triggers any emotions in you, you must suppress them. Expressions of emotion will only further their hypothesis that you are in fact female.
6. Do not (under any circumstance) be an introvert.
Most medical students learn this quite quickly when trying to maneuver their way through classes and extra-curricular activities, but there is no doubt that it is most important to be the least introverted version of oneself when on the wards. You will be rewarded for speaking loudly and fervently even when all you are saying is complete gibberish. When asked questions about a patient you are following, you should answer as quickly as possible. You will receive a swift pat on the back and you will feel great about yourself.