
FIELD NOTES | SPRING 2015

A Familiar Accent

By **Edith Bracho-Sanchez**

I am standing in a tiny on-call room avoiding a blow to the head as my classmates open and close their lockers. Out the corner of my eye I pay close attention to what they are putting in their white coats for signs of something I've forgotten. Neurology is the one rotation where you need to bring everything with you. Eye chart. Check. Tuning fork. Reflex hammer. Cotton swabs. Check. Penlight. Not turning on. I put it in my pocket and make a mental note to fix it later.

We are all out in the hallway, unsure what to do with ourselves. I start arranging my pens by color. One color for my own notes, one color for what the resident says, one color for words that completely escape me. I drop the red pen and we all lean forward to pick it up. The tuning fork flies out of my pocket and hits the floor with a clank. As I reach for it the reflex hammer follows. The nurses turn our way. I can't decide what to quiet first and as I reach for the hammer the penlight sneaks out. It's on now. Check.

Whatever confidence my tool-laden, perfectly arranged white coat had given me is now gone. I am determined to stay in the back of the room the rest of the day.

The team moves quickly, we reach the room of a sixty-something year old woman with pain down her arm. Ms. Rodriguez is small, fragile, and missing a few teeth. The attending physician starts asking questions. Ms. Rodriguez looks at her husband. He translates. His choice of words, "usted" instead of "tú," the intonation at the end of every sentence, and his worried but above everything polite manner, reach me and transport me back to my grandmother's house, 12 hours away from Caracas and almost at the border with Colombia. I feel warm, safe, welcome; this couple speaks just like my abuelita. I know they are Colombian. The husband can answer most of the questions: she's had the pain for six months, worse in the last ten days, mostly in the right arm. Ms. Rodriguez quietly turns to him then "dígame que es como que algo me va a salir, como que algo quiere salir." The husband struggles to translate "tell him it's like something is trying to come out." He skips this detail. How many times did I struggle to translate my mother's complaints and questions when I went with her to the doctor's office just a few years before? I understood the poor man. The attending moves on to the neurological exam. Follow my finger. Close your eyes tight. Tongue out. Does this feel the same as this? The husband is struggling more and more to translate at the speed the attending would like to conduct the exam. Put your arms out, push against me then towards me. Ms. Rodriguez is confused, she looks at her husband but he is confused too. Must be their first neurological exam. "Empújeme señora, ahora háleme hacia usted." There are two of us on our first neurological exam now, I think to myself. Ms. Rodriguez talks to me and only me from then on. I can't help but wonder -had she noticed the length of my coat? How stuffed each pocket was? Does she understand this means I don't know anything yet? Pushing the thoughts

aside I decide to check her reflexes. Plantar reflexes first- a simple scratch to the bottom of the foot should make her toes curl down. Her feet feel small under her socks, too small, but I am on a reflex-checking mission. I remove her socks and a cruel reality hits: Ms. Rodriguez had lost all her toes to diabetes. A wave of fear, shame, and deep pain for this woman, whose eyes are now locked with my own, overcome me and I freeze. What now? I put away my useless reflex hammer, put her socks back on, and give her leg a gentle squeeze.

The team starts leaving, “gracias doctorsita” Ms. Rodriguez smiles with gratitude. I join the team to learn she has a calcification of her spine likely to be pinching a nerve and causing her pain. Surgery would have to be called. But did she even want surgery? Send the medical student to find out.

“Su columna vertebral esta presionando su médula espinal justo en el lugar donde salen los nervios hacia su brazo.” I gesture with my hands, simulating the nerves being compressed. The look in her eyes tells me she has understood, and I feel a little pride. Now just find out: does she want surgery? Ms. Rodriguez looks puzzled. After a long silence she reaches for my arm, right where the white coat ended and my own skin began. “Tengo miedo doctorsita.” She was scared! And she’s got me by the arm! I say the only thing that comes to my mind: “I would be scared too.” The confession dissipates just enough tension for me to think. “The surgery team has not been called yet Ms. Rodriguez, there are many discussions to follow.” “Will you be here?” “Yes”.

The next morning I skip the coat-stuffing dance in the on-call room and go straight to her room. “Tuve un accidente” An accident? What kind of accident? She hadn’t made it to the bathroom. A few moments later I am pressing the chief resident. What if she is incontinent? Shouldn’t they scan her lumbar spine too? He agrees.

I had reacted to Ms. Rodriguez’ eyes, to her fragility, to her familiar accent, like a knee to a reflex hammer. A powerful, instinctual feeling had overwhelmed my timidity and it was then, right at the moment I let myself be touched where my white coat ended and my own humanity began, that I realized I had long been ready. It turned out I didn’t open any of the pocket books I carried with me, and my tools had long proved useless. It was being there, within arm’s reach, ready to embrace my own need to protect and comfort my patient that put me on the road from “doctorsita” to “Doctor.”