

*Dominique Williams, MS, Class of 2023*

The initial encounter went smoothly. I stepped into my preceptor’s office, calculating the various outcomes of my next encounter, and proceeded to give a detailed outline of my patient. I eagerly awaited for a response as my preceptor diligently typed away on his phone. As my words became fewer, he peered over his email and smiled. I was unsure if he was elated that my rambling had ended or if he was pleased with my thorough report. He plainly said “Good, we will return to the room and you can discuss your plan of care with the patient.” This was a reward unlike any other. I was floating as we walked across the hall, proud that I had proven my worth as a medical student. I was determined to give this patient the best care he had received all day. I knocked on the door, put on my game face, and walked inside.

“Hello again!” I wanted him to feel at ease so I asked if he wanted to discuss any other issues with the doctor before I proceeded. He kindly declined and rested back on his chair. I happily explained that most of his labs were good and then abruptly changed my tone when I showed him my disapproval of his high LDL cholesterol. I questioned why the value had changed so drastically from his previous visit. He looked at me with reluctance and explained that he had been consuming meals from every fast food restaurant his sights landed on. He enthusiastically listed places like Popeye’s, Zaxby’s, Chick-Fil-A, KFC, and a slew of other similar places. Without hesitation I told him he should not be eating fried foods so often. I was adamant that this was a risk to his health. I was so passionate about helping him that I didn’t realize my voice was forceful instead of suggestive.

He looked at me like a child who had just been reprimanded by his parents. The tone in his voice changed and he stated his next words so clearly I felt them resonate in my bones. “You don’t understand.” Immediately I felt my reaction, I was offended. How could I not understand? I was someone who tried sincerely to see other’s perspectives. I held my tongue and continued to listen to what he had to say. He explained that he was recently released from incarceration. The food they served was beneath any known edible substance. They are forced to eat slime called food because it was the next best option to starvation. Anything served was either expired, stepped on, rolled in dirt, or a mixture of all three. He continued to explain that when he was released,

the food on the outside was a sanctuary he had been deprived of for all of those years. He explained that he didn’t know when the next time he would get a meal like this was, so he was going to eat up as much as he could for as long as he could. I felt guilty but I still lacked empathy. I responded by saying I understood, but I still stood by my initial recommendation of avoiding the fried foods and consuming more vegetables. He gently said, “I understand. I will do better.” We shook hands and parted ways soon after.

My preceptor was composed, silent, and observant during the entire encounter. We returned to his office and he looked at me with his usual demeanor. I felt relieved that I had let the patient know how important his health was and expected my preceptor



to congratulate me on a job well done. He took a few moments before he spoke. The first words that followed were “I expected more.” My mind went into full panic mode. I was rerunning scenarios of what had potentially gone wrong. He said, “For someone full of empathy, you showed our last patient none.” I felt like a dagger had been thrown and pierced me straight in the heart. Had we developed two different memories from that last patient encounter? He explained to me the realities of jail and what our previous patient had endured. I felt like a monster. I lacked understanding with the one patient who probably needed it the most. I sat in my chair and licked my wounds as I replayed the situation the way it should have gone. That patient was one of the most kind and understanding people I had encountered on my preceptorship. Thanks to him, every patient I encountered after him has been welcomed with empathy and understanding. My only regret is that I didn’t get the chance to treat him with the same honor. ■