

Extenuating Circumstances:

Does a Stereotypical Surgical Personality Exist?

By Shawn M. Vuong, MSIII; Richard P. Holm, MD

Foreword

This is a creative work by third-year Sanford School of Medicine of The University of South Dakota student Shawn Vuong. For several years, we have worked together to write a medical blog called “Dr. Boomer & the PDA Kid”. He has, as well, developed a separate personal blog about his experiences and feelings as a medical student. This essay from his personal blog was picked up by the rather famous www.kevinmd.com blog as Shawn speaks to his observations about the “surgical personality.”

Like most of what he writes, Shawn's perspective is honest, clear and remindful of student days. What I would say now after 30 years of practice about the surgical personality is unlike Shawn's observations. I would say that surgeons are different than medical people, however, *viva la difference*. But take a minute and bring yourself back to those student days by reading some great student writing.

Richard P. Holm, MD

Recently, our class learned and practiced how to correctly scrub for surgery. During this little lab activity, we were all gowned up and washing our hands when a couple of classmates asked if I was going to be a surgeon.

I said I didn't really know yet, although I did find surgery pretty fascinating. With that, they told me that they thought I would make a good surgeon, due to the fact that I always seemed calm and collected but confident enough to tell people what to do. I told my classmates that the act I'm pulling has them fooled, and I continued on with the lab. But it got me thinking, what is the surgical personality, and do I have it?

The stereotypical surgical personality is said to be “decisive, well-organized, practical, hard-working, but also cantankerous, dominant, arrogant, hostile, impersonal, egocentric and a poor communicator.”¹

I think I am decisive, organized, practical and hard-working. But am I cantankerous, arrogant, hostile, impersonal and egocentric? I hope not. I can admit that my communication skills probably need work. I think I'll give myself the benefit of the doubt, and rate my communication skills as average instead of poor.

So there it is: I am half the surgical personality, according to the stereotype (in my eyes — maybe everyone else thinks I am hostile and egocentric and thus fit the stereotype perfectly).

I've met a few surgeons, and it sure doesn't seem like they all fit the stereotype. Does every surgeon have this personality or are there a few bad apples setting up the reputation for the profession?

I personally think that some of this “mean surgeon” reputation may come from residency training. A tired, overworked resident may snap at a surgical tech or nurse, and then they are just another hostile surgeon. It could be that some of

these bad habits picked up in residency training stay with attendings, and then this stereotype gets perpetuated.

It has been argued that the military-like leadership of a surgeon must exist in order for an operating room to run.² In today's ORs, this strategy for operating is actually counter-productive and may lead to more mistakes. Many studies have shown that the surgical personality really can't be measured or pinned down, because perhaps it doesn't really exist. Some other studies conclude that the surgical personality does exist but it's not to the extreme that the stereotype plays it out to be. They conclude that novelty seeking, competitive, reward-dependent, extroverted-thinking types, who score high in activity traits, self discipline and achievement while scoring low in compliance and vulnerability tend to be surgical types (note that many of these studies concluded this data, but not to a significant difference from the general population).³⁻⁷

Obviously, a stereotype is just a stereotype and not everyone is going to fit it. Surgeons out there can be personable and nice, just like they can be mean and hostile. Do I have the surgical personality? Maybe, but one could argue that many medical students fit that hard-working, competitive mold or we wouldn't have gotten into medical school. Will my “surgical personality” push me towards a career in surgery? Only time will tell.

REFERENCES

1. Cherrington L. “I'm a surgeon – respect me!” *Student Archives – British Medical Journal*. 2008 February, 29; Online Article. <http://archive.student.bmj.com/issues/08/02/life/062.php>
2. Thomas JH. “The surgical personality: fact or fiction.” *American Journal of Surgery*. Am J Surg. 1997 Dec;174(6):573-7.

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