

# Narrative Medicine: Essays on Health and Care

---

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 2

---

2024

## Lost in Translation

Demiana Boutros

Providence College, [dboutros@friars.providence.edu](mailto:dboutros@friars.providence.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/health>



Part of the [Health and Medical Administration Commons](#), [Medical Education Commons](#), and the [Medical Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Boutros, Demiana (2024) "Lost in Translation," *Narrative Medicine: Essays on Health and Care*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/health/vol1/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Providence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Narrative Medicine: Essays on Health and Care by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Providence. For more information, please contact [dps@providence.edu](mailto:dps@providence.edu).

# Lost in Translation

by Demiana Boutros '27\*

Going into high school is a major adjustment. Teens face a lot of pressure to find their people and meet certain standards. There were expectations to act and look a certain way and if you didn't meet them you were seen as an outcast. For me, that was increasingly difficult as someone who wasn't confident in myself. Every time I looked in the mirror all I saw was my acne. I felt that it defined me. School dances or events were a nightmare. I constantly compared myself to my friends and I distanced myself from others to avoid the constant thoughts of, 'I wish I looked like her.' My friends started to notice when I intentionally avoided social events and gatherings. I eventually explained how I was feeling to one of my close friends. She explained to me that she started seeing a dermatologist and thought I should try it. I talked to my parents and once they were on board I called the office my friend recommended to me. The dermatologist she'd been seeing wasn't taking any new patients, so I was assigned to another doctor.

My first visit to the dermatologist was traumatic. I sat in a cold exam room with my mom and felt extremely anxious. My palms were sweating. I was so nervous and just wanted the visit to begin. After a while, Dr. Smith - the dermatologist - came in. He was fairly young, wore a white coat, and avoided eye contact. He was looking

at the computer for a while in awkward silence. His medical assistant came in to take pictures of my face. He didn't ask how we were doing or if we had any questions or concerns about anything. He simply just asked what brought me in. I instantly felt overwhelmed. He appeared hurried and stood the entire time. Before he left the room, he took a quick glance at my face and told me he would write a prescription and that his assistant would handle it from there. We were both very confused and had many unanswered questions. My mom was born and raised in Egypt, and didn't come to America until she was 30. Her English was always a source of insecurity, and it led her to hold back from asking questions with doctors. Even though my first language is English, I had no idea what he was saying; he spoke in complicated medical terms without explaining them:

Dr. Smith: 'I'm prescribing you Winlevi, Tretinoin, and 100mg of Seysara.'

My mom: 'Are there any side effects to look for?'

Dr. Smith: 'There could be erythema and pruritus.'

My mom looked at me - it was clear she didn't understand what he said. She didn't feel

\*Note: Names have been changed to protect the privacy of patients and providers.

comfortable asking for clarification. Luckily, I knew these terms and began translating for her. My Arabic isn't the best but I turned to my mom and tried to translate to the best of my ability. He eventually cut me off and said it was a topical treatment that should work within a couple of weeks – if anything unusual occurred, he told us to call the office. In about five minutes, the visit was over.

I continued seeing Dr. Smith for about two years. I resented going to the dermatologist more with each visit. Occasionally he would switch things up, but there was no long-term improvement. Each treatment only felt like it had downsides. I used the topical treatments before bed and sometimes woke up in the middle of the night with extremely irritated and itchy skin. My skin was always dry. All of this felt like it was for nothing. I became very frustrated. So many people go to the dermatologist and see progress within a year. Why not me? I started to think maybe my acne would never go away.

My visits with Dr. Smith were always the same. He would come in, take a look at my face, say a few things to his medical assistant, and then he'd be on his way. Once I turned 16, my mom stopped coming with me. Dr. Smith did not make her feel like her opinion was valued so she did not see a point in coming anymore. I didn't know how to go about switching dermatologists, so I just stayed with him. My self-confidence was at an all-time low. As I kept going to visits with no improvements, I lost confidence in myself and lost hope that my condition would get better.

When I turned seventeen, I decided to switch providers. My mom refused to come with me on my first visit because she was ignored and disrespected before. I went on my own to a new dermatology PA. On my first visit, I was extremely nervous. When she came into the exam room, I noticed a clear difference - she had a warm smile, wearing scrubs and a jean jacket. She didn't just jump right in, but sat down and introduced herself as Danielle, and asked me how I was doing. She took time to get to know me.



After looking at pictures of my face from my first visit compared to now, she asked me if I was happy with my results so far. She wanted to hear my concerns before offering her opinion. I expressed to her that I didn't feel a noticeable difference and was looking for a different treatment plan. She agreed with me that the progress shown wasn't ideal for the time I've been receiving treatment. She didn't dismiss my feelings and when I expressed my concerns to her, she explained things to me in terms that I could understand. She also mentioned that she wanted a parent to join me on my next visit because she felt like a parent being present to determine the next step is crucial.

My mom was reluctant to come with me after our experience with Dr. Smith, but after I described my visit, she agreed to join me for my next appointment. She didn't want to ask questions because of how Dr. Smith had treated her in the past. Instead, she turned and asked me in Arabic to ask the questions. Danielle noticed this, and turned to my mom to ask if she had any concerns. She didn't make us feel like we were uneducated or that she didn't have time for us. She explained the best she could, and I filled in the gaps for my mom. She was extremely patient while I translated for my mom. After leaving this visit, I felt hopeful for the first time in years.

During my visits with Danielle, she not only heard my concerns but acted on them. After a trying a couple of different treatments and seeing some progression, she asked me if I wanted to try another treatment plan. I expressed that I still didn't feel confident in myself and wanted to try

something new. She was extremely supportive of that and quickly introduced me to Accutane, something that Dr. Smith never mentioned to me during the two years I saw him.

After a couple of months taking Accutane, I saw a noticeable difference - not just a physical difference, but also a mental one. I didn't feel like I couldn't leave the house without putting makeup on and didn't avoid going out with my friends or taking pictures. I started to feel like myself again - something I hadn't felt in a long time.

This experience highlights the importance of patient-physician relationships. By not putting in the effort to communicate with my mom, despite my attempts to advocate for her by either translating for her or asking questions on her behalf, Dr. Smith didn't provide the best care and ultimately failed to form a proper relationship with us. Since more than 20% of US residents speak a language other than English at home, healthcare providers need to take that into account and find ways to build relationships with all of their patients. My relationship with my dermatologist - and feeling like I was not a priority for him - had a greater impact on my life outside the exam room. Strong relationships between providers and patients facilitates better communication and health outcomes.

**“Since more than 20% of US residents speak a language other than English at home, healthcare providers need to and find ways to build relationships with all of their patients.”**