

Narrateur

REFLECTIONS ON CARING



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The Doctor Will See You Now

I was alone the first time I visited Dr. Stephen Cowan. I was searching for a doctor for my son, Andreas. Diagnosed with cerebral palsy when he was one, he was nine at the time of this visit.

Dr. Cowan made me a cup of tea and asked about Andreas. "Start at birth and take me year to year," he said. The pediatrician listened to Andreas's story with compassion. The visit lasted over two hours. The only time he took his eyes off me was when he looked down at his note pad. He chronicled my son's challenging life.

Andreas was conceived through *in vitro*. His twin brother moves through the world easily — no disability stops him from running, playing sports or talking with his friends. Andreas is nonverbal and uses a wheelchair. I had sought the meeting with Dr. Cowan, a developmental pediatrician, to get his insight into Andreas's condition and to pursue ideas that would best serve my son.

Andreas accompanied me on the next visit.

As Dr. Cowan and I talked, Andreas watched the leaves blowing outside the office window. Dr. Cowan directed my gaze to my son: "Look at him in this moment. There is no cerebral palsy present. He is completely at ease. It is only when he attempts to do something with his body that the cerebral palsy presents itself."

By this time I had encountered many doctors who could not see past the cerebral palsy label and, therefore, could not see Andreas. They saw the disability, nothing more. Without truly seeing my son, they had little to offer us.

Now here was Dr. Cowan, watching my son enjoy the autumn leaves. When you change how you look, you change what you see.

The doctor had chosen to look at Andreas in the restful moments, when his body and mind were completely at ease. He did not judge him as disengaging from the conversation, nor did he invoke the initial diagnosis to explain away every symptom and every concern, as so many others have.

Andreas is not his disability. Dr. Cowan was able to see through the disability and embrace the moments of ease when the disability is not present. While cerebral palsy has no cure, healing can occur when treatment extends those moments of ease.

Dr. Cowan saw Andreas, and he saw me. He told me that he may be the physician, but I am the one who has a degree in Andreas-ology.

This man has the wisdom to recognize that everyone comes to the table bringing experiences and questions that are unique to him or her. All of us — doctor, patient and parent — have something to contribute.

Dr. Cowan showed me that it is possible to find doctors who can see. He respected my son. Andreas may not be able to speak, but he was able to pick up on the language and tone of our exchange.

I have seen others treat Andreas as if he were an inanimate object. Subsequently, I have seen him become lifeless.

My son meets challenges that few will ever know. While it is often hard to navigate Andreas's world, I have come to learn that there are people who can see him and who do understand.

I hope that I always look for the Dr. Cowan in others.

Janet Farrell Leontiou, PhD, is an adjunct associate professor in rhetoric and public advocacy at Hofstra University.



Adrift

Danielle Llanos is a second-year medical student at the Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell. Her painting is a rendition of the open sea, depicting its turbulence and vastness.