

I'm a black doctor. I wear my scrubs everywhere now.

It's about protecting myself.

By **Arturo E. Holmes II**

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As a urology resident, I spend up to 70 hours a week at the hospital. I wear scrubs to the operating room and through long hospital shifts. And, of course, I wear a gown and other personal protective equipment over my scrubs when caring for patients with covid-19 in Brooklyn.

Even when I'm not there, though, I wear my medical scrubs everywhere. I wear scrubs and a mask when I'm shopping at the grocery store, rollerblading home from work and even meeting up with friends, always seeking to preemptively exonerate my blackness with my professional garb.

It's about protecting myself. Like many black Americans, I've been followed by security personnel through department stores without cause and pulled over by police officers at night for no reason.

When I'm in scrubs, all of that happens less often.

No single incident compelled me to wear scrubs everywhere.

However, one night in the spring of 2019 after a long day at the hospital stands out. At the time, I typically changed clothes after work and put my scrubs in a machine that sterilizes them, but that evening I was exhausted and left the building with a surgical hat on my head and hematuria stains on my uniform. On my way home, around 2 a.m., I found myself behind a black car with tinted windows traveling less than 10 mph on a deserted two-way street. After this continued for a couple of blocks, I decided to pass the car. As soon as I did, blue lights came on, and I pulled over. The car pulled alongside me. Both passenger windows rolled down.

I immediately thought of Stephon Clark, who had been shot one year earlier in his grandmother's backyard. Four police officers were in the car — two in the front, two in the back. The driver reprimanded me from across the front passenger seat, assuming that I had known they were police officers and that I meant to disrespect them. They asked if I intended to make light of the New York Police Department and began to question why I was out driving at 2 a.m. They seemed to have spotted my license plate, because they told me that I wasn't in Georgia anymore and that the NYPD was everywhere and runs the city. They said they were looking for suspects in gang-related shootings in the area. But when they finally noticed I was wearing my surgical hat and scrubs, they dropped the whole line of questioning. My outfit seemed to ease their suspicions about a black man driving late at night. Without it, I wonder if that encounter would have ended differently.

Now every time I hear about a tragedy that began with a routine traffic stop, I think of that experience and how I am perceived differently in casual attire. When I'm wearing my scrubs, I can walk through high-end stores without suffering side glances or being followed. I can visit friends in affluent neighborhoods and not be questioned about why I'm in the area.

The protests this summer over the way law enforcement officers often mistreat black Americans have underscored the fact that my scrubs may be the only reminder for others that I am a person and not just a skin color. This is a difficult, unmerciful reality that I face every day. It shouldn't matter that I have dedicated my life to saving others. And yet, every day, I risk encounters that could result in false claims about my behavior or false assumptions about my character that could escalate into harassment, arrest, violence and even death. That's why I wear my professional uniform like armor, hoping this fabric might mitigate deadly prejudice. For some, its pale-blue hue signals a degree of humanity that my skin color seemingly does not.

I find it extremely painful to watch the videos of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis police custody. I have thrown myself into my work to cope with the anguish of similar stories. Even if I avoid the news, the overwhelming sense of grief and fear remains because these scenes represent real possibilities for me, my friends and my family. But I have found hope in the protests. My first real-life encounter with protesters was on a walk home from work in mid-May. I passed demonstrators of all ages and colors standing peacefully, holding

signs acknowledging and celebrating the value of people like me. I was born American, but I have never felt more accepted in America than at that moment.

Still, many people won't even acknowledge that there is a problem. I went to high school and college in Georgia, so I see social media posts from people I considered friends who refuse to recognize why so many have taken to the streets. I have seen posts about the "George Floyd Challenge" — in which two people gleefully pose, mocking the dying posture of Floyd and the police officer who killed him. It is unsettling that they don't appear to care that I or another black person they know could be the next crying out that they can't breathe. They seem to think that because I went to med school, that couldn't happen to me. They are wrong. My scrubs are not impenetrable, and they don't make me invulnerable. The training that lets me don them also reminds me how easily bullets would tear through cloth, how little they would protect me from a knee on my neck.

Still, I wear scrubs. I wear scrubs hoping that they'll serve as a reminder, just enough to give pause, forcing those who would judge or harm me because of my skin color to reconsider. I wear them even as I know that I shouldn't have to, that no one should have to harness a professional uniform in the pursuit of respect, let alone survival. I

wear them knowing that they offer questionable protection at best. No one should have to wear scrubs — or anything else — to be seen as worthy of human decency. Even if wearing scrubs everywhere were right and reasonable, it would not be enough. And yet, in moments of uncertainty, scrubs may be all I have. I do not want to wear scrubs everywhere, but until Black Lives Matter is more than just a slogan, I will.

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