

# Q U E R Y

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I got into a shouting match in the hospital today.

It started innocently enough. I wanted to discuss the upcoming month's call schedule. I'd covered a few extra days for a colleague over the past month, and I needed some time off so that I could look after my daughter while my wife was away. I figured my request would be granted automatically, especially in light of the fact that I had accepted his shifts with little lead time. So confident was I that there would be no problem, that I was turning away when I heard:

*No.*

*Can't.*

*Sorry.*

If it hadn't been ten to eight in the morning. If there had been a better brew of coffee, a lighter patient load. If the newspaper had held less apocalyptic dread. If my pager had been more patient. If I weren't already late for the office. If I hadn't needed the time, *needed it*, since I had already promised my wife, assuring her that there would be no problem. If I had taken a nice, deep breath and started again. Instead:

*What?*

*What do you mean?*

*Why not?*

After that, the verbal donnybrook, the shaking-mad decibel war. I reared myself up and began to look threatening. All thought toward productive negotiation was lost; what

was left was ... well, taken to its illogical conclusion, a fist fight. We moved closer, posturing. I'd have bopped him in a moment if he hadn't smacked me first.

My pager started to ring.

Before that day, the last fight I'd ever been involved in was with my brother. He stole my orange Popsicle and sat on me when I complained, arms tied behind my back. I could hear him slurping as he bounced up and down, driving his point home. I was five years old. He was six (and he was heavy).

I'm told that the crowd enjoyed the spectacle. Used to the yawning proceedings of break-fast-tray removal and vitals checks at that point in the day, an actual fight between doctors was felt to be unusual. I think by now the entire hospital has sworn that they saw the whole thing. Nurses, custodial staff and patients.

Something bumped into my adversary, and from behind him came an old, kyphotic man with no hearing. The elderly man used a walker, and we had to move aside in order for him to pass and return to his room.

*Excuse me, doctors.*

We watched him go slowly by and turn into a nearby doorway.

I took a deep breath and wondered how I could start again.

— Dr. Ursus