

The Case of Kevin Douglas

Jompobe Vuthiganon
Medical University of South Carolina

Kevin Douglas is a dental student who is gay and unsure about coming out to the faculty and staff at his dental school for fear of being treated unfairly. A situation with a staff member, however, makes him wonder if he should report inappropriate behavior at the risk of outing himself. Kevin was shocked. Is she making a homophobic comment in front of a patient? Should he say something to her superiors?

INTRODUCTION

Kevin Douglas was a student at a dental school in the Southeastern United States. Overall, Kevin was pleased with the school and profession that he had chosen. The faculty and staff were overall friendly and helpful. The next four years promised to be a challenging, but rewarding time.

COMING OUT IS HARD TO DO

Kevin is also gay and was open about it during his undergraduate education, albeit not at first. In the small, conservative town he grew up in, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people were not viewed upon favorably. But his undergraduate school, located in a more liberal area had a very supportive environment. Not only did it host pride events on campus, but it also had an active LGBT student group and offered one of the few sexuality studies program in the United States. Meeting other LGBT people who were comfortable with themselves and surrounded by supportive friends and family helped him come to terms with his own sexuality and come out not only to himself, but also to friends and dorm mates.

I HAVE A FEELING WE'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE

His undergraduate environment was now seen as a bit of a luxury as the move for professional school brought him to a new, but conservative environment once again. Upon further research, he learned that his fear about his new school was not totally unfounded. The LGBT student group was pretty inactive and the admissions discrimination policy did not include "sexual orientation" in its list of protected classes. In a student newsletter published a few years prior, a gay medical student

recounted several encounters of anti-gay comments from attending doctors, including one who felt homosexuality should be reinstated into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) as a mental disorder and that homosexuals are not fit to be doctors. While these comments were from the medical school side, it stood to reason that such attitudes might be present in the dental school as well. If an instructor or clinic attending with similar feelings found out he was gay, would that adversely affect their perception of him as a student and, consequently, his grades and recommendations?

As a result, Kevin was very cautious about coming out. He made the choice to not come out to anyone during the first semester of dental school. From past experience, it seems that if that was the first thing someone learns about you, you'll forever be wearing a "gay" sign in that person's eyes and Kevin wanted to be known for his academic and clinical abilities instead of being "the gay classmate/student."

Having gotten a feel for his classmates after the first semester, he came out to his closest friends while studying for a biochemistry exam. Fortunately, they were all supportive. One girl who became one of his best friends even replied happily, "I knew it! You were too familiar with the Golden Girls."

While he had his close friends, Kevin didn't make a point of telling everyone. One classmate commented that a microbiology exam was "gay" because of how difficult it was. Another commented how glad he was that a film other than *Brokeback Mountain* won Best Picture that year. And Kevin doubted it was because he didn't like the liberties that Ang Lee may have taken with Annie Proulx's short story. Clearly, not all in his class would be totally supportive. Furthermore, what if one student found out and began telling other students and eventually it made its way to the faculty?

THE CLINICS

Now in his third year, Kevin had just started seeing patients in the clinics. The transition from treating a mannequin head to a live patient was quite the adjustment. Working on teeth is quite different when there's a living, breathing person with a gag reflex and pain receptors on the other end.

One day, Kevin was beginning treatment on one of his newly assigned patients. The patient was a friendly gentleman and since it was a cleaning, it wasn't a complicated visit. After the visit, Kevin accompanied the patient to the front desk to pay for the visit and make his next appointment.

At the desk was Tonya, who had been working at the school for well over a decade. Overall, she was a good person and had good rapport with the patients. She did,

however, have her less than courteous moments, particularly with students. From the short time that Kevin had known her, she seemed to often have a sour facial expression and had a tendency to be curt with him and other students.

Kevin was passively listening to Tonya and the patient banter back and forth, almost flirtatiously.

“So what do you do?” asked Tonya.

“I’m a bartender at this hole in the wall called The Bridge,” replied the patient.

“Well, I don’t know about that place. What other bars do you like to go to?”

“I also like Slingshot, the Tap, and Pipeline.”

“Isn’t Pipeline a gay bar?” Tonya replied with a look of concern.

The patient replied, “Well, yeah, but it’s a fun place. They do karaoke on Wednesdays.”

Tonya’s facial expression was clearly disapproving of such a place. Turning to Kevin, “Would you go to a gay bar???” she asked as if to say, “Why would anyone want to be in a place with gay people?”

Trying to not get too emotional and also to show the patient that not everyone at the school thinks like Tonya, Kevin said “Sure. I have no problems with gay people.”

Tonya gave another disapproving glare and continued with her work.

After the appointment, Kevin was still pondering what Tonya had done that day. It was confirmation that at least one person on staff was prejudiced against LGBT people. He also learned at a later appointment that the patient was gay as well. *Should I have said something more? Clearly, intolerance of LGBT people is something that should not be discussed in front of any patient, let alone one who is gay. If I confronted or reported her, would she figure out that I am gay and spread the word about me to the other staff members and faculty?*