

Doctor Ilene Wong

*Urologist and author of YA Novel
"None of the Above"*



By Sulan Wu

Illustrated by Emily Herrold

Dr. Ilene Wong, under the pen name I. W. Gregorio, wrote her debut novel None of the Above, after being inspired by an intersex patient during her residency at Stanford. Dr. Wong is an intersex advocate, a member of interACT: Advocates for Intersex Youth, and a founding member of We Need Diverse Books™.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What is intersex and how have intersex people been affected by doctors and the rest of the medical community?

Intersex is an umbrella term that describes anyone who was born with sex characteristics that fall outside of the normal standard of male or female. This includes chromosomal anomalies or issues with external or internal genitalia. Unfortunately, the term intersex is problematic itself. Many people conflate intersex with gender, even though intersex has to do with biological conditions. Words are important. Being both a physician and a writer allows me to internalize how important language affects not only how we interact with people, but how we deliver care. 80% of intersex patients have changed care just because of the words that their provider uses.

I believe that the main thing that concerns me with how medicine has treated intersex is that medical professionals often pathologize this biological condition, deeming it as a disorder that needs to be fixed. Rather, it is a static identity that can be treated with psycho-social intervention or medical intervention when it is necessary. What concerns me is, why would a social emergency be treated with a surgical intervention?

When I speak to most intersex individuals, it is clear that many of them feel so much distrust towards the medical community because of how they have been stigmatized and shamed. Getting rid of the idea that they are anomalies can translate to better awareness in medical school, better training, and better care at all levels. Everyone needs to know that there is no normal—that the girl next door can be intersex and your chromosomes don't need to prevent who loves you and whom you love.

Q: There are many ways to advocate, support, and inspire change. As a surgeon, you have treated an intersex patient and are also a member of interACT. What prompted you to write this novel and how did it address the issues between the medical community and intersex people?

It's funny because many people ask me how a urologist became a writer, when I think the better question is how a writer became a urologist. I actually always identified as a writer. Growing up in the conservative part of central New York and being the only Asian person in my class, I grew up as an outsider. Books, as a result, have always been my sanctuary—they were always my friends.

I could both write and be a doctor, and in many respects, being

a doctor would give me the life experience and stories that I could shape what I wanted to tell. When I met my first intersex patient, however, I realized that there was a huge gap in our literature, particularly in young adult literature. When I think back on the books that I've read, it was really the children's and YA books that really changed me. Teenagers, right now, are the ones who change the world and I couldn't be prouder to be a YA writer.

Q: How did your intersex patient personally inspired you to write your novel? What other particular experiences influenced you to write None of the Above?

The main reason that my patient inspired [me] was because my medical education left me utterly unprepared to take care of her. I had to educate myself on how to care for intersex people. And they are often the educating doctors on what the unique aspects of their care are. The more I looked into the intersex support group pages, the more I became more aware of how great a disservice medicine has done to the intersex community.

After talking to my patient I realized that she was unaware that she was going to have hormones for the rest of her life after we removed her testes, and potentially also had to do vaginal dilations. Clearly, there had been a major lack of communication between her and my attending doctor, and it was frightening to me [to realize] how people can be coerced into undergoing life-changing surgeries without understanding what they'll be going through.

Q: What do you hope that people get out of reading your novel and learning about your efforts for change as an intersex advocate?

I hope that people start realizing that intersex exists and they can do their part to stop intersex shame and stigma. By doing that, they can help set the groundwork for the medical professionals to stop doing unnecessary surgeries. More often than not, the really problematic intersex surgeries happen because of parental anxiety—parents are afraid of how their kids will grow up, and if they will be bullied or treated differently. [If] parents can see their child and realize that they are healthy and not be so worried about these long-term consequences, then they might be less willing to consider surgery and be more willing to let their child be who they are. ●

