



Deborah Fabian, MD, FAAOS, is a successful orthopaedic surgeon at the Gallup Indian Medical Center in New Mexico.

Courtesy of Deborah Fabian, MD, FAAOS

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Diversity

Transgender Orthopaedic Surgeon Talks About Discrimination

Last year, AAOS Now published a three-part series on perspectives from the orthopaedic LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer [or questioning]) community (“[Are We Inclusive or Exclusive?](#)” October 2019; “[Early Career Advice from the LGBTQ Community](#),” November 2019; and “[Members of the LGBTQ Community Discuss How to Accelerate Cultural Change](#),” December 2019). As a follow-up, this article seeks to share

the experience of a member of the orthopaedic community who is a transgender individual.

Deborah Fabian, MD, FAAOS, is a successful orthopaedic surgeon who has transitioned; her story can serve as an educational opportunity for AAOS Now readers about transgender patients and the specific issues they must navigate. The insights can help promote a more inclusive culture within the specialty, as well as better care for patients.

Dr. Fabian works at the Gallup Indian Medical Center in New Mexico. Her exploration of gender identity began at a very young age. Around five to six years old, Dr. Fabian wanted to dress like the girls her age. However, even at that young age, she knew that vocalizing that desire was not accepted and was considered taboo. In the 1970s, there was no appropriate terminology to describe transgenderism, and any allusion was often described with a derogatory term. In her early teens (around 13 to 14 years old), Dr. Fabian began privately putting on her sister's clothes and continued to cross-dress into adulthood.

Living in secret

Transphobic attitudes were present throughout Dr. Fabian's training and professional career. One incident that resonated with her occurred during her psychiatric rotation in medical school. A transgender patient was admitted to the hospital after an attempted suicide. The general consensus among the psychiatric residents was that suicide was an acceptable solution for the transgender patient. Later, as a general surgery resident, Dr. Fabian was arrested for cross-dressing. The experience of spending a night in jail caused her to contemplate suicide as well.

Reflecting on her life, Dr. Fabian realized she was never truly happy as a man. Despite the popular notion that transgender individuals feel that they are in the "wrong body," Dr. Fabian did not share the same sentiment. The male persona was just not how she wanted to present herself to the world. She realizes that her male body had been helpful during her life, allowing her to achieve many goals. Prior to becoming an orthopaedic surgeon, Dr. Fabian was in the Navy and was a candidate for the All-American soccer team. She had a great life as a man, but she was still not happy. Dr. Fabian constantly waited for the unhappy feelings to go away with the next life stage or achievement, hoping that perhaps marriage, kids, completion of residency, or the start of a successful orthopaedic practice would result in happiness. However, she never achieved that happiness as a man.

Dr. Fabian was able to come to terms with her gender identity with the help of a therapist who specializes in sexual orientation counseling in the LGBTQ community. Dr. Fabian's

supportive marriage with her wife, Leslie, who she first met when she was cross-dressing, also helped. In fact, Leslie first suggested that Dr. Fabian transition, noticing her misery.



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Sharing her journey

The transition process took approximately two years. After meeting with an endocrinologist at Boston University who specializes in working with transgender patients, Dr. Fabian was both ecstatic and apprehensive, concerned about how the change would affect her relationships and practice.

During the first year of transition, Dr. Fabian took hormones. During the second year, Dr. Fabian slowly began to reveal her plans to other people. During that time, she was working

in a solo private practice and was 62 years old. Because of her role in the hospital's ethics committee, Dr. Fabian decided to use one of the biannual ethics conferences to "present" herself as Deborah to the rest of the hospital. Although the initial acceptance by staff, colleagues, and referral sources was very positive, her once-successful practice dwindled and eventually closed. The surgeon with whom she previously shared an office for nearly 30 years remained supportive, and they continued to work closely for an additional three years.

One of the biggest challenges Dr. Fabian has encountered is job discrimination. As a man, Dr. Fabian had two career moves, and he never had a problem securing job offers. In fact, he would submit five to six applications and receive five to six job offers. However, after the transition, Dr. Fabian has applied for more than 80 job opportunities; many will either not call her back or tell her the position has been filled—only to repost the same job a few weeks later.

One specific example of discrimination occurred during her transition. Dr. Fabian had secured an orthopaedic hospitalist job in another state in preparation for the potentially negative consequences to her practice after the transition. Although she initially received a job offer, it was later rescinded, and falsehoods were used as reasons after she informed the new hospital and recruiter about her transition. Since transitioning, she has perceived the discrimination to be secondary to being a transgender individual, not because she is now a woman.

In her own words, Dr. Fabian wants the orthopaedic community to understand the following: "It is not a choice! Transgender patients would like to be treated with respect, just like any other patient. It is important to try to use correct pronouns and, when in doubt, just ask. For the orthopaedic surgeon, the medical treatment of transgender patients is no different than any other patients. In fact, best practices are very simple—treat people with respect, provide gender-neutral bathrooms, and act like you care."

For more information on Deborah Fabian, MD, FAAOS, and her journey, read a book written by her wife, Leslie, titled, "My Husband's a Woman Now: A Shared Journey of Transition and Love." The book details Dr. Fabian's challenges and changes on the road to becoming Deborah.

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