How do I deal with a colleague who keeps pronouncing my name incorrectly?

A name is an integral part of our identity so when someone gets it wrong it can feel personal. Ingrid Torjesen finds out how to tackle this

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Teach people how to pronounce your name

Nuthana Bhayankaram, paediatric registrar and vice president of the Medical Women’s Federation, says, “Firstly, I want to thank you for bringing this up as I think it happens to many people and we don’t always know how to tackle it.

“I have a very unusual name, which gets pronounced in all sorts of interesting ways. I’m always grateful when people make an attempt to pronounce it, even if it’s incorrect.

“While I used to feel awkward correcting people, I’ve come to realise that nobody is a mind reader and since it’s my name, I should take responsibility for teaching people how to pronounce it correctly.

“In doing this, I would start by acknowledging that people pronounce names in different ways, which means that some mispronounce yours. I would then demonstrate how to pronounce it correctly.

“In my experience, most people are horrified to learn that they have been mispronouncing my name and are happy to learn the correct pronunciation.

“If you’ve already corrected someone once, but they still mispronounce your name, you can tackle the matter again. Thank them for trying to pronounce it correctly and help them to do this. You might have to keep persisting and that might feel awkward, but keep at it.

“Likewise, when coming across people with names that we are not familiar with, the best thing to do is to ask the person how to pronounce their name. They won’t be offended—they will be delighted.

“And asking someone to re-teach you how to pronounce their name isn’t awkward—it shows humility and care.”

Getting someone’s name right is a minimal requirement for showing respect

Xian Zhao, postdoctoral fellow researching ethnic name pronunciation, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, Canada, says, “Correctly pronouncing a person’s name is something very basic for a human being—it is a minimal requirement for showing respect for others. In a medical workplace, it’s even more relevant, since mutual respect matters for occupational satisfaction and high quality healthcare services.

“A name represents one’s core identity. Indifference to name mispronunciations suggests that a doctor is perceived as replaceable and robot-like. Being insensitive to others’ names reflects an egocentric and dehumanising view of working relationships—treating fellow doctors as inferior, especially those whose names do not reflect the mainstream culture. This climate fuels ostracism and reduces inclusion, creating barriers for professionals from ethnic minorities to fit in and succeed.

“This apathetic pattern of treating fellow doctors may also transfer to doctor-patient relationships. When patients’ names are similarly mispronounced, it hurts trust, recovery, and wellbeing, and reinforces racial health disparities.

“Doctors whose names are constantly mispronounced by colleagues can choose to confront such microaggression. We should, however, take the onus off them by actively building an inclusive environment and fixing the culture that tolerates such behaviours.

“We should build a culture in which doctors are always expected to pronounce their colleagues’ names appropriately—as well as their patients’.

“It is never too late to correct mispronunciations—we can do this by simply searching for examples of correct pronunciations on the Internet, by humbly asking others who have the cultural knowledge, or admitting difficulty and politely asking the medical colleague in question to demonstrate again.

“Small inclusive behaviours are vitally important for workplace inclusion.”

Include phonetic spellings on badges, lanyards, and even office doors

Javed Thomas, cofounder of Race Equality Matters, says, “A recent poll of 180 people working at more than 100 organisations found that 73% had experienced their names being mispronounced. They told us it made them feel ‘not valued or important,’ ‘disrespected,’ and that ‘they didn’t belong.’ Some 88% thought a phonetic name spelling campaign would help.

“Our #MyNameIs campaign has resonated with so many people and has truly highlighted that taking the time to get someone’s name right means more than you think—and this applies to both colleagues and patients.

“We are encouraging the use of phonetic spellings of names as standard practice across various sectors, including healthcare, and launched a digital tool that translates names into phonetics to support this.
“In any healthcare environment, where emotions are already heightened, the situation can be exasperated by a healthcare professional getting a patient’s name wrong. Patient experience can be made significantly better or worse all through the pronunciation of a name. Simply making the effort to ensure the correct pronunciation will go a long way.

“When patient data such as name, address, and contact information are collected, why not collect phonetic names too? When multiple doctors and nurses can see one patient, imagine how helpful it would be for them to have the phonetic spelling of a name written on the patient’s record.

“Phonetic spellings can also be included on badges, lanyards, and even on the door of a doctor’s office. Wherever a name would be placed, so too can the phonetic spelling. This simple addition can help colleagues and patients alike.”