As emergency medicine (EM) physicians, we use humor as a way to cope with a difficult diagnosis, patient loss, or an uncomfortable consultant interaction. While those who have worked with me in the emergency department know that I thrive on a relaxed and joking environment to make the shifts go by, I want to shed light on a worrisome trend that I have noticed. I want to talk about the overuse of self-deprecating humor by physicians in our specialty. I have only been in the field of emergency medicine for 2.5 years, and I cannot count how many times I’ve heard my co-residents, friends in EM, even attendings end a story or consultation with the phrase “but what do I know, I am just an emergency room doctor.” Some physicians have even gone so far as coining the term “JAFERD” (just another f****** emergency room doctor).

Though jokes, even self-deprecating ones, can quickly diffuse a tense situation, my sense is that sometimes the “just an ER doc” phrase comes from a place of insecurity. I’ve witnessed residents and attendings give thorough explanations regarding their thought process and reason for a consult, only to end with the wobbly “but I’m not sure, I am only an ER doc.” Using this statement in a professional setting diminishes the validity of your question and possibly the consultant’s opinion of your clinical knowledge and reliability. Why use language that can negatively impact your intelligence? Have you ever heard a surgeon say “I am JUST a surgeon?” We all went to medical school and matched in a competitive field, trust in your knowledge and hard work, be confident in your exam and thought process. We are not perfect. We are allowed to get things wrong; it’s hard to keep up with new literature and new protocols on all of medicine. But when speaking to a consultant who is questioning your management, don’t shy away and hide behind the phrase JAFERD. Explain to them where you are coming from and eagerly ask to be educated on the new literature that consultant is guiding their treatment off of. And while some may use JAFERD as an inside joke, when heard by outsiders the “just” portion of the phrase can be misconstrued as lacking confidence or as excusatory.

I don’t expect this article to change everyone’s mind when it comes to using self-deprecating humor. My hope is that next time you consider making a statement calling yourself a JAFERD or “just an ED doc,” you make sure it is not to undermine your management or knowledge. And if you thrive on acronyms and phrases, consider using BAFERD (bad-a** f****** ER doc) instead, as that is more representative of a physician who saves lives daily.

Though jokes, even self-deprecating ones, can quickly diffuse a tense situation, my sense is that sometimes the “just an ER doc” phrase comes from a place of insecurity.