“Are you old enough to be doing this?” This became the familiar refrain of many of the patients I encountered upon completing my Anesthesiology residency. At 29, I finished training relatively early and, at risk of sounding conceited, was told that I looked closer to 19. While this is great for actors, boy-band singers, and undercover high school narcotics cops, it can be a problem for an anesthesiologist. We have to gain a patient’s trust quickly in our profession, usually within a few minutes of meeting them. It’s only natural for a patient to prefer a physician who does NOT look like they just came out of training, or middle school for that matter. Needless to say, some of my patients or, even worse, my patients’ parents, were looking for a little extra reassurance. They asked pointed questions such as “How long have you been doing this?”

This is a tough question to answer in those first few months out of training. Do they mean, How long have I been out of medical school? How long in private practice? How long today? I would usually answer with something vaguely along the lines of, “I graduated medical school four years ago and have been doing anesthesia ever since,” without going into the details of my residency, etc. Eventually I learned to make jokes, “I’m actually 72, I just stay out of the sun,” or “I skipped med school, but I stayed in a Holiday Inn Express last night.” Ultimately, I found that the best solution was to be professional and compassionate and to confidently express to the patient and their family that I would provide them with outstanding care.
I’m still young, but 7 years of private practice filled with trauma, crash c-sections, and difficult airways has taken some toll. An achy back, crow’s feet, and smile lines sadly add up to fewer and fewer patients commenting on my age. This morning I noticed the real clincher: that first grey hair sprouting up from the top of my forehead. I think I can pinpoint the cause: it was that two year old who had laryngospasm in MRI last week, or maybe it was the protamine reaction we had in cardiac the other day? I suppose I can’t be sure. What I can be sure of is that the time is coming soon when a patient will greet me with the new dreaded question; “Are you too old to be doing this?”