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Clinical Exemplar

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ANGEL

As we go through life, there are certain experiences we endure that will leave lasting impressions in our hearts and change who we are forever. This particular Sunday night I will carry with me with each passing day. My experience from this night is packed with a variety of emotions ranging from grief to pride. But mostly, it is a constant reminder to me to live each day fully and be the best person I can be.

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I came into work for my night shift in the PACU and got report that there was an ICU case in progress with no other cases to follow. Shortly after my shift started we received a call from one of the OR nurses asking if we would mind being their runner to the blood bank as their tech didn't arrive until 11:00 pm. When working permanent nights you certainly get to know the other "off shift" staff very well. I had worked with this OR nurse often and told her we were available for whatever she needed.

My PACU colleague that night was off to the blood bank for the second time when the OR nurse phoned me again. In the background I could hear alarms sounding, people calling out and the urgency in her voice as she asked, "Could you come in here now please and help us?" As I quickly headed toward the OR, I felt my adrenaline rush as I put my hat on. When I opened the doors and entered the room, I knew I would never be the same person.

The young man on the OR table was arresting; he appeared to be a young teenager. There was a resident doing chest compressions, three anesthesiologists at the head of the bed working together to administer medications and manage his airway. There were surgeons at the bedside ready to assist as needed. The room was buzzing with sound and people. This "quick snap shot" of this moment felt like eternity to me. It felt like I was watching something from a movie. Everything

was happening so fast, but seemed like slow motion as I looked on. I had to bring myself back to reality and find the OR nurse to see what she needed me to do.

After calling the ICU to ask for assistance from their attending MD, I was quickly assigned the role of “recorder” in this critical code situation. Surprisingly to me, I handled it well. I have never been one to feel comfortable in critical situations, but, having now attended PALS as well as our annual PACU mock code sessions a few times, this role felt more familiar. I was careful to repeat back the medication that the anesthesiologist was calling out to be sure I was recording correctly. The EKG reading on the monitor was familiar to me as were the readings being called out by the fellow anesthesiologist. But as we anxiously waited to see if there would be any positive response to medications given, I kept looking at this young man wondering where he was spiritually at this moment. At times, it felt again like slow motion to me.

Having entered into the situation without prior knowledge of this particular patient, many questions went through my mind. What were his parents doing? Did they expect this? Why couldn't we fix this? How can the doctor from the ICU handle this so calmly? How is this going to end? This can't end the way I think it might, or could it?



It was exactly 38 minutes from the moment I entered the OR room to the moment that the team realized they had done and tried everything they could to save this young man's life. The room became very quiet as monitors were turned off and verbal commands stopped. I will never forget this moment. For at this moment, I believe, if only for a brief second, every member of that team hung their heads all feeling the sadness of a life lost. We all had very different backgrounds, but, at this moment, we were all very much the same.

We continued to work as a team while we determined the next necessary steps. The communication between us remained strong as each person identified what needed to be done and by whom. The attending surgeon phoned the parents of this young man at their home and remained nearby waiting for their arrival. The information desk in the lobby was alerted of the situation and was asked to send the parents to the ICU to prepare for their arrival. I learned that the young man lived in a residential facility and while hospitalized, the parents visited during the day and went home at night. We wanted this time with their child to be peaceful and calm, handled with dignity and empathy.

The nurses from the ICU walked us through the necessary steps. A memory box was provided and we were able to take imprints of his hands for his parents. We looked up their religion and arranged for a clergy member to be

available for support. A Spanish interpreter was on standby if needed. We removed medical equipment from the young man's face and gently cleaned his skin. We brought him from the OR to a private room in the PACU and made him look as peaceful as possible. We had chairs at his bedside with tissues and blankets ready. Everybody was doing their best to make sure this heartbreaking moment was handled with as much care and support as possible.

The parents arrived and they were appropriately distraught. We gave them a moment to let their emotions run and then began to listen as they spoke. I watched as the attending surgeon engaged with the parents and listened to their story. It became clear to me that this chronically ill child had been through many critical care situations. The parents were told when the child was born that he might not see his first birthday; now he was in his 20s. They expressed their gratefulness for each day their son lived beyond that first year.

To my own surprise, I felt very at ease conversing with this family and my words for them came easily. They acknowledged that they were sad for themselves, but felt at peace that their baby suffered no more as they believed that he was in a peaceful place. They shared some stories with us of their lives over the years and smiled some through their tears as they spoke. As sad as this was, I was honored to have shared in this moment with them. As I walked them to the elevator, they thanked me for all the care this hospital has given their son and for all we did for them.

I left work that morning feeling very sad and drained, but also extremely proud of the team I worked with that night and our hospital as a whole. Everyone pulled together to make sure we honored the life of this young man and cared for his family as well. Anyone and everyone we phoned to help us through this night were ready and eager to help. I will never forget this night, the people I worked with or the young man we cared for, appropriately named Angel.

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