

The Tears You Do Not Expect

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Waves of tension crashed through my body. She screamed through closed lips trying not to move. I held my breath, my jaw clenched. Despite the general movement and chatter in the theatre, her scream was the only sound I could hear as it echoed through my ears. She squeezed the nurse's arm so tight her skin went white. It was just minutes earlier that I had met this woman and been in awe at the calmness she radiated as she happily chatted about her expanding family and unfinished nursery. Now? Now she was kissing her husband before being prepped for general anaesthetic.

It was day one of my women's health placement and as a third-year medical student observing Caesarean sections I was trying to take up as little space as possible in one of the corners. It is hard to describe the internal tug-of-war I was experiencing. On one hand, I was trying to be professional. I felt the heaviness of imposter syndrome, my mind spinning trying to keep up with the new language of obstetrics I had walked into hours earlier. On the other, I desperately wanted to help in the only way I knew. I was immobilised by the helplessness of being unable to ease the pain this woman was experiencing. The woman was confused and asking questions, her voice shaking. Those questions went largely unanswered.

I do not know where I gained the ability to take that first step, but one foot in front of the other I walked over to the top of the bed and sat by her head. The chair her husband should have been sitting on as they welcomed their second baby into the world. I asked if she would like me to sit with her. Her whole body was trembling, her teeth chattering and the tears on her face glistened against the harsh light of the operating theatre.

I held her hand and stroked her hair. She was scared. She asked questions that were well beyond my knowledge, but I did my best to explain the parts I understood so she felt heard. She squeezed my hand tight. She was still scared so I tried to redirect. I told her where her husband was and what to expect after the procedure. I asked about her older child and that unfinished nursery. I asked whether she had any plans for this bubs name. She squeezed my hand so tight; I could feel it going numb, but I did not mind. Her anxiety grew with the chaos of people touching and moving her to set up for the procedure. I massaged her temples when she said she was going to throw up. I taught her my favourite breathing technique, square breathing, when she was struggling to keep focus and talk to me. We breathed together. I had not realised how much I needed that too. Instinctively, I knew that is where I needed to be but

no medical school communication class prepares you for moments like these. I am not sure I know what I felt in that moment but sitting in that seat holding her hand was the most me I had felt on placement. We continued breathing together right up until they placed the mask on her and she went to sleep with tears still staining her face. Her grip loosened as she drifted with the anaesthetic but I still had to physically remove my hand from hers.

I do not really remember the details of her caesarean, I mean yes, I could recite the steps of a standard caesarean section and I am sure they were quite similar but do I remember those few minutes? No. My next memory is being back in the corner trying to take up as little room as possible again. In my head I was going over what I had said, making sure I had not stepped beyond my scope, that I had done the right thing and that I had not got in the way. Then? Then she was awake and frightened once more. The resident was telling her of the success of the procedure and how perfect her baby girl was. She was still woozy. The whole-body trembling had returned. She was left alone as she came to. It was like none of the previous deliveries earlier on the day where everyone fussed on the new mum and bub.

She was scared and alone. We made brief eye contact and all I could see was fear. Once again, I found myself by her bedside. She asked questions. She trembled. She cried. And then, she hugged me. During that hug I felt something warm on my face, whether it was my own single tear or the tears that stained her face hitting mine as she pulled me toward her, I do not know. Either way, I would cry more tears over this woman than I ever expected.

As a third-year medical student I am on my journey of firsts. Many have occurred and many are yet to come. The first code I watched while holding my breath. The first time I delivered bad news and felt the weight of that person's world breaking into a million and one tiny pieces with them. The first death I witnessed. There are many moments that I know will stay with me for as long as I live, moments that are etched into a part of my memory forever. Memories I am reminded of at times I expect least: in the words of a song, or in the darkness of my own eyelids as I drift to sleep. These are times I expected to shed a tear, and I did. However, nobody prepared me for the tears that have come in the experiences you least expect.

Poppy and her experience into motherhood for the second time was the first unexpected experience that has stayed with me and become etched into my memory. It changed me and how I have since approached my time on placement. After two years of cramming more knowledge about the human body and diseases than I thought was possible, I was suddenly in the hospital with a security card that let me in to almost everywhere in the hospital. Faced with this new responsibility, I lost a little bit of myself. Up until this point in my rotations, I had worked so hard to present myself as competent.

In that hour I experienced so much. I experienced every emotion I can name, I felt incompetent, I felt proud, I was commended, and disparaged for the very same action. In that hour I was reminded of my why. Despite being the typical answer we give, at the core, it is not helping people that truly draws and keeps one in medicine. Helping is simply not always enough. For me it is recognising and responding to the person who presents in front of me. It is being part of a journey, no matter how long you walk that road with them.

It has now been months since I met Poppy but I think about her often. She gave me the chance to find myself in amongst the chaotic world of medicine and the hospital. She gave me the chance to re-evaluate my values as a medical student and future doctor. She showed me that it is ok to cry those unexpected tears and be true to me. While in the fog of imposter syndrome she helped me find clarity and point my compass to true north.

Having now had the time to process my experience, this is what I have learned: there is always time for humanity in medicine. Play the game of cards, grab the sandwich, or simply sit with the person. It took a little while and some challenging conversations with myself but I have discovered that all the competence in the world does not matter without some compassion and more importantly, vulnerability. I have grown in confidence. I have made mistakes. I continue to develop my own style in comforting. I am still early in my own journey to becoming a doctor however, I will take this with me as I continue onwards: just as patients are human and deserve compassion, doctors, too, are human and are allowed to experience emotions and display such compassion.