

The Placenta Freezer

Category: Birth

written by Joan Greland-Goldstein | December 3, 2024

Soon after I started my orientation as a labor and delivery nurse, an obstetrician called to say he was sending in a patient whose labor needed to be induced since he was no longer able to hear the fetus's heartbeat. An ultrasound had showed the baby to be anencephalic, so it was expected to be a stillbirth.

When the mother arrived, we didn't do the usual check of the fetal heart rate—just started the intravenous line and the drug to stimulate contractions.

Mercifully, she had a short labor and within a few hours we moved her to the delivery room. The mother didn't want to be conscious during the birth, so the nurse anesthetist gave her IV sedation.

The infant was born quickly, a little girl, perfectly formed from the neck down. The obstetrician laid her on the mother's stomach while he clamped and cut the cord. Suddenly the quiet of the delivery room was broken by a tiny mewling sound. The baby was alive and crying, though feebly.

Above his mask, the obstetrician's eyes flitted frantically around the room, as though he was searching for someone to blame.

"I told the mother it was dead!" he said. "She can't wake up and hear it crying!"

He delivered the placenta, then put the newborn into the aluminum basin on top of the placenta and handed it to me.

"Here—put the baby in the placenta freezer."

The nurse mentoring me just shrugged as I turned to her for guidance.

Having been taught to always follow a doctor's orders, I walked to the utility room and dutifully did as he instructed, putting the entire basin, with the infant in it, into the freezer.

But a voice inside me said *This is wrong! You can't just kill this child!*

Moving the basin to the counter instead, I wrapped the baby in a blanket. As I did all the usual tasks required with a newborn—cleaning off the blood and fluid, taking footprints, affixing ID bands—the weak mewling continued intermittently. It wasn't long after the chores were done that the little girl stopped breathing.

I was shaken by how close I had come to taking a life and will be eternally grateful that I found the strength of character to disobey a doctor's order.

The other nurse did the charting. I never checked to see what she or the physician documented, but I'm sure the birth time and death time on the certificates were identical, instead of indicating that the child had lived for fifteen minutes.

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