

Ten Days and Counting

Category: Worry

written by Jeffrey Seitzer | May 7, 2018

We were waiting anxiously for a surgery to correct a stricture in our newborn son Ethan's aorta, just four days following another procedure, to repair defects in his throat. After Ethan was prepped for surgery, the cardiovascular surgeon called us aside.

"Our first surgery," he said, "took much longer than we anticipated. We are all a little tired. If you feel strongly that we should go ahead with the operation, we will do it as scheduled. But we would rather wait until Monday."

While he spoke, the number ten was flashing in my mind's eye. I was obsessed with the idea that ten days on a ventilator was an event horizon of sorts: a point of no return, beyond which hearing loss would be inevitable for Ethan. This was irrational, an idea with little or no factual basis. But what do facts matter to a serious worrier? Delaying the surgery until the first thing Monday morning might be what pushes him past the ten-day barrier, I convinced myself. I desperately wanted to say that they should go ahead with the surgery.

In a rare moment of self-restraint, however, a surprise to me most of all, I said: "We trust your judgment. If you are too tired, then you should postpone the surgery."

The surgeon seemed relieved and smiled shyly, while shaking his head as I offered to take his team out for a drink.

I resumed my post at Ethan's cribside, staring at the monitors in hopes of improving the numbers they displayed. I imagined a police lineup of likely culprits in hearing loss: a ventilator, a large bottle of the heart medication Lasix, a vital signs monitor, some surgical instruments. The entire time Ethan was in the NICU was like being in a tag-team wrestling match among anxiety producers, with each one reaching desperately to tap another as it lost its power to unsettle me. Baron von Lasix paired with the Ventilator, versus the ever-shifty O2 Level and Panic Attack, famous for his harrowing blood pressure drop. If there were an Olympic event for fretting, I would have been a gold medalist.

Ethan did develop hearing loss. It was crushing at first. We never learned the cause, though in the end it didn't matter. With digital hearing aids and speech therapy, he developed excellent language skills and great social skills. Poor Baron von Lasix's career came to a premature end.

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