

Happy Birthday

Category: Telling the Truth

written by Kristen Zozulin | March 2, 2019

"Oh my god, this whole thing was so crazy!" the patient exclaimed, relief tinged with exasperation.

"Yea, that was crazy –," I caught myself and glanced nervously at the resident, hoping I hadn't committed a classic medical student-gaffe.

He responded diplomatically, something about having made the right call for the situation.

We should have been in the OR hours earlier, at the first sign of fetal distress. Instead, she was left writhing in pain in the labor bed. I wet a cloth for her face and watched the fetal heart rate drop lower and lower. We helped her change position at every deceleration. She cried out with every turn.

There was a forced calm inside the patient's room, while an argument raged outside. The attending wanted to wait and give the patient more time to deliver vaginally. The junior resident stated she was "very uncomfortable with the situation," and relinquished the case to the chief, while the nurses stood with pursed lips, eyes fixed on the monitor strip.

Finally, at the OR table, a fountain of green meconium erupted from the incision. When the infant emerged, he was limp. I dried him as best I could, furiously rubbing his stomach and head to stimulate him. They quickly handed him off to the nurse after the cord was cut, and minutes passed before I heard a newborn's cry. The pediatrician said she would need to take the boy to the NICU.

In other cases I had observed, the baby was placed skin-to-skin with the mother until the end of the case, giving the parents their first chance to marvel at their child. This time, the parents watched their baby boy being wheeled away in a plastic box, his tiny face covered by an oxygen mask. I wondered if they felt robbed of those first moments.

I visited the couple the next day in the NICU with their son. I wanted to say I was sorry. I wanted to say they deserved better. That if we had acted sooner, their baby would be going home rather than spending his first days being weaned off oxygen. That was what I wanted to say, but what I said instead was, "Congratulations."

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