


# The Words I Did Not Say

Category: Stories

written by Heather Edward | November 9, 2018

I WAS ON MY FIRST ACTING-INTERNSHIP, THE PART OF FOURTH YEAR WHERE YOU TAKE ON PATIENTS AS THE PRIMARY PROVIDER FOR THE FIRST TIME.



MY SUPERVISING RESIDENT →

I admitted this patient for you overnight. Neonatal rule-out sepsis. Very straightforward. Perfect for an AI.

RULE-OUT SEPSIS IS WHAT WE DO WHEN ANY VERY YOUNG BABY HAS A FEVER. WE GIVE THEM ANTIBIOTICS AND WAIT A COUPLE DAYS TO SEE THAT THEIR CULTURES ARE CLEAR. THEY ALMOST ALWAYS ARE.

I GOT TO KNOW MY PATIENT AND HIS MOM.



I COULD TELL THAT SHE WAS SCARED, BUT THIS WAS RULE-OUT SEPSIS.

WHAT I SAID	WHAT I DIDN'T SAY
I know this is scary, but we see it commonly. You were right to bring him in and we're taking care of him.	Usually we're being overly cautious, but sometimes we've not and something can be very wrong.



ON THE SECOND DAY, HE SEEMED TO BE GETTING WORSE.




I think his belly hurts. He's so fussy. Shouldn't his fever have broken?

WE NOTICED SOME LAB ABNORMALITIES AND CALLED SOME CONSULTS.

WHAT I SAID	WHAT I DIDN'T SAY
We're adding another medication and running more tests, like the specialists discussed. But it may just be a common virus that has to run its course.	I'm really worried about him.



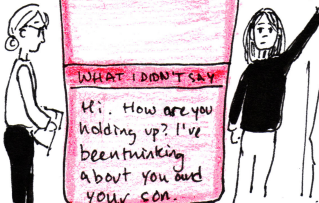
THE NEXT MORNING HE WAS IN CLEAR DISTRESS. WE CALLED THE PICU BEFORE ROUNDS AND THEY TOOK HIM.



LATER THAT WEEK, THE SPECIAL TESTS CAME BACK POSITIVE FOR A RARE DISEASE.

THE NEXT TIME I SAW THEM WAS A COUPLE MONTHS LATER, ON ANOTHER ROTATION. HE WAS READMITTED FOR TREATMENT. I PASSED HIS MOM IN THE HALL.


WHAT I SAID	WHAT I DIDN'T SAY
Hi. How are you holding up? I've been thinking about you and your son.	



I FELT SO GUILTY, LIKE I HAD MISLED HER. I WAS TOO EMBARRASSED TO APPROACH HER.

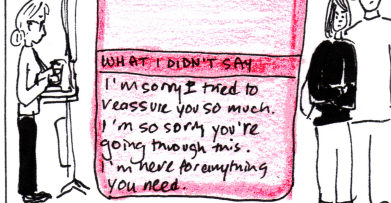
THE NEXT MONTH I WAS AN AI IN THE PICU. HE WAS ADMITTED TO THE OTHER TEAM THERE. I SAW HIS MOM EVERY DAY.

WHAT I SAID	WHAT I DIDN'T SAY
	I don't know if you remember me, but I took care of your son when he first came in. If there's anything I can do to support you...





I WAS SWITCHED TO HIS TEAM. WE ROUNDED WITH HIS FAMILY EVERY DAY. HE WAS GETTING SICKER. THE TREATMENTS HADN'T WORKED. HE WOULD DIE SOON.

WHAT I SAID	WHAT I DIDN'T SAY
	I'm sorry I tried to reassure you so much. I'm so sorry you're going through this. I'm here for anything you need.



EACH DAY I'D PROMISE MYSELF - TOMORROW, I'LL TALK TO THEM.

HE PASSED AWAY ON MY DAY OFF. WHEN I CAME BACK THERE WAS A NEW PATIENT IN HIS ROOM.



I WAS LEFT WITH THE WEIGHT OF ALL THE THINGS I WOULD NEVER HAVE THE CHANCE TO SAY.


I WAS SAD, AND ANGRY. I NEVER WANTED THAT TO HAPPEN AGAIN...



SO I DECIDED NOT TO LET IT.

Well school is hard for him, because, you know...

Actually, I don't - tell me more.



THESE DAYS, I ONLY CARRY ONE BOX.

## **Heather Edward**

### **About the artist:**

Heather Edward is now a pediatric intern at the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University/Rhode Island Hospital. Her comics have been included in the National Academy of Medicine's [Expressions of Clinician Well-Being](#) online gallery and Zucker School of Medicine's Celebration of Visual Art. "I started using comics in med school as a way to express myself and to process my experiences. I hope that it helps me become a more compassionate and reflective doctor. As an intern, it's harder to find time to engage in this reflective work, but I'm working on it!"

### **About the artwork:**

"This is a story about a patient I cared for in medical school. I drew this comic for a narrative-medicine elective during my fourth year. The lesson I learned I still carry with me. That lesson pushes me to question why conversations are uncomfortable, and to overcome those feelings in order to connect with patients and families and to support them as best I can."

### **Visuals editor:**

Sara Kohrt

### **Story Editor:**

Diane Guernsey