

An Unusual Request

In the Emergency Department

A few years ago during a particularly busy ED shift, the radio announced a cardiac arrest in progress, 2 minutes out. Nurses, technicians, and I quickly scrambled to prepare a room for this patient's arrival. We readied our drug cart and equipment as the paramedics rushed in with the patient. On a backboard and already intubated was an obese, cyanotic man in his late thirties. A paramedic was doing chest compressions, while another pressed on the resuscitation bag. The patient's lifeless, purple-blue face was an indication that our efforts were likely futile. While I quickly assessed the apparently hopeless situation, I heard the report from the paramedic:

"Thirty-seven-year-old man jogging, went down, unknown length of time, v-fib on scene, asystole en route, multiple drugs given with no change. He just got married 2 weeks ago and started jogging today to get in shape. The family should be here now."

I now knew it would be more about the family than the patient. I halted the resuscitative efforts, and the nurse announced the time of death. I walked out of the room to meet the family.

Immediately, I was surrounded by his newlywed wife and her sister, as well as a few others. All were crying. "I'm Dr. Maulfair, the emergency room physician. I

regret to tell you that Mr. Smith has died." The cries increased in volume. I expected the patient's wife to say something, but she stepped back, put her head down, and wept.

Her sister immediately took charge. "They just got married 2 weeks ago. They wanted children. You need to obtain sperm for artificial insemination." She said it as plain as that, as if she was asking for a blanket or directions to the bathroom. I had never heard of such a thing—postmortem sperm collection, let alone in a busy emergency room, in a near-certain medical examiner case. (Given the patient's age and sudden death, an autopsy would likely be performed.) I politely protested that this was an unusual request. The patient's sister-in-law persisted as if this was a normal procedure, and that I was somehow remiss for not honoring the family's wishes. My thoughts raced. All I could think about was the genetic material they were seeking; from a man who was morbidly obese and dead from a heart attack before age 40 years. I resolved the issue by having the family contact the medical examiner with their request. Like so many other ED stories, I never did discover the final outcome.

—**Mitchell Dean Maulfair, DO**
Winter Park, FL

Copyright 2004 by Turner White Communications Inc., Wayne, PA. All rights reserved.