

Awake and Aware

In the Emergency Department

Another trauma patient rolled into our ED. A man in his mid-forties had run his car off the road and hit a tree. He didn't have a scratch on him but had complained of some chest pain. "I think the steering wheel hit him in the chest," said one of the EMTs.

As a third year surgery resident, I had already seen my fair share of trauma patients. I could spot the routine from the serious pretty quickly. This patient was routine. Nonetheless, I moved quickly through the ABCs. As I prepared to further assess him with an abdominal ultrasound, I heard my attending shout from across the room, "He's in V-fib!" At this point, I saw that he was apneic as well.

We jumped into action. Realizing he had no pulse, we quickly got him intubated and started chest compressions. After securing the airway, I relieved another resident who was performing chest compressions. By this time, we had the shocks and meds going. Then, while still doing chest compressions, I looked down at the guy's face and noticed that he had this look of awareness. "Surely this guy isn't awake?" I thought. I stopped compressions; no pulse. . . he lost consciousness. After I resumed compressions again, he woke up, raised his arm, and even pushed on me somewhat. Shortly thereafter, we sedated him.

After resuscitating him and then losing him several times, we were able to restore a persistent, normal rhythm with a pulse. He had no trauma issues. What he did have was a massive myocardial infarction followed by a minor traffic accident.

Cardiology was consulted and arrived on the scene. Within minutes, he was taken to the catheterization laboratory where he received several stents. He spent the night in the ICU and was extubated the next morning.

He was not on my service, but my concern for him and my curiosity surrounding the events were high. I went by to see him again after he was extubated. He asked me why his chest was so sore, and I explained that he had needed chest compressions the night before because his heart had stopped beating. Then I asked, "Do you remember anything about last night after getting to the hospital?"

He said, "Yeah. I remember this guy on top of me trying to hold me down and I just couldn't get him off of me." I realized then that the patient *had* been awake, with no pulse, sustained only by my chest compressions. I'll admit that I was a little freaked out, but I reassured him that we were trying to help him, and he seemed to understand. He left the hospital 4 days later; according to his cardiologist, who gave me periodic updates, he had an excellent recovery.

This case left me with an unforgettable memory of a patient who was not only being sustained but was actually awake, owing to my pressing his heart into his spine.

—Gregory P. McDonald, MD
Cartersville, GA

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