

One Week Before Their 47th Wedding Anniversary

At Home and in the Intensive Care Unit

I hate codes. I have always hated codes. Maybe I'm supposed to feel differently, but the adrenaline rush that probably energizes most doctors just makes me feel sick to my stomach. But like all well-trained physicians, I learned to do what I had to do until the code became a series of reflexes. Sometimes the code is "successful," only for me to find out later that the patient died of the underlying problem that initiated the arrest or of severe anoxic brain injury (or perhaps worse yet, the patient survived with severe brain injury).

The aftermath is what I dislike most about a code, and it is this aftermath that I find so difficult to stop thinking about. Someone—a husband or wife, mother or father, son or daughter, or some other loved one—has to be told of the event and the outcome. Life goes on for the rest of us while their private hell is just beginning, leaving them wondering how the world could go on turning.

Unfortunately, some codes are more memorable than others. I was at home one Saturday evening when I received a phone call from my sister, who was in town visiting my parents. All I remember hearing her say was that the "paramedics are here," and I was instantly out the door. When I arrived at my parents' home, I ran inside and saw my mother lying on the living room floor, stripped to the waist, intubated, and being bagged. Everything around me became surreal. I watched the paramedics doing chest compressions, and I remember hearing one of them say, "No pulse. Can't get a pressure." There were calls for epinephrine and lidocaine, and then finally I heard that one word that still makes me wince—Clear! I watched her entire body contract with each shock. I remember watching ventricular fibrillation and torsades scroll across the monitor and dumbly thinking, "She's not going to like this at all. They cut off her favorite snow bunnies sweatshirt."

The code was "successful," and she was in sinus rhythm when she arrived at the hospital. Although she was still unconscious, my family was relieved to see her moving her arms and legs in the emergency department. But I saw her posturing. I didn't say anything.

By morning she was completely flaccid, and her pupils were fixed and dilated. The physician covering the intensive care unit (ICU) came into the waiting room and said to my father, "Your wife has most likely had a massive heart attack. She is on maximum life support. There are more tests and procedures we can do but . . ." I knew what was coming.

My mother died a short time later, after my father said his last good-byes. This time it was *my* family left to deal with the aftermath. It was *my* family that was beginning their private hell, left to wonder how it was possible that the world could go on turning. It was one week before my parents' 47th wedding anniversary.

Two months later, I was on call covering the ICU. In the early morning hours I heard the overhead page for a "Blue 100!" It was the first code I had been to since my mother died, and I was relieved to see that the code was already running smoothly by the time I got there. The code was "successful," and I was the admitting senior resident in the ICU. The patient's pupils were fixed and dilated, and she had no spontaneous respirations or movements. From her heart rhythm and blood pressure, it appeared that she was trying very hard to die. And despite our efforts, she was succeeding. I made the phone call to her family. Her husband arrived soon afterward, and I went into the waiting room and said to him, "Your wife has most likely had a massive heart attack or possibly a blood clot to her lung. She is on maximum life support. There are more tests and procedures we can do but . . ."

I wondered stupidly if he knew what was coming. He left a short time later, after saying his last good-byes. I knew exactly what sort of private hell was waiting for him and that the world would go right on turning anyway. And I knew it was one week before their 47th wedding anniversary.

There are two codes that are indelibly carved into my conscious memory. I would give anything to forget them both. I hate codes.

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