

Christmas in Appalachia

In an Intensive Care Unit

It was Christmas day 1985. I was a young doctor in rural southern Appalachia, and I was covering the practice of the busiest physician in town, so my hospital practice was hopping. Three hours earlier, I had admitted a 70-year-old woman with posterior neck pain to the intensive care unit. Luckily, we obtained an electrocardiogram, which revealed approximately one foot of ST segment elevation in the anterior leads. Although finished with my rounds after admitting my patient, I decided to wait around until she was more comfortable. (I found that we did a lot more waiting around in the prethrombolytic era.)

So, when my patient went into sustained ventricular tachycardia (V-tach), I was all over it. I buzzed her at 100 joules and she converted. Having lost consciousness briefly, she awoke looking confused but kind of peaceful. That's when she started singing "Walk with Me, Jesus."

My patient, we'll call her Faye, stopped singing suddenly—she was back in V-tach. I buzzed her again and she came back. Her singing then continued. I was not very familiar with this hymn, but the nurse related that the patient had not missed a beat. We pushed lidocaine and increased her drip, but the cycle kept repeating itself—"Walk with Me, Jesus," pause, V-tach without a pulse, defibrillation—with Faye awakening blissfully each time and carrying on with her hymn. We tried lidocaine, procainamide, bretylium, and magnesium,

but over the next 45 minutes, Faye kept singing and her heart kept twitching.

Finally, on the thirteenth countershock, Faye stopped singing. Her heart was cruising along in sinus rhythm and stayed there. She looked at me intently and began conversing with me. "Where you from, Doc?" "How long you been here? How do you like it?" and on and on in that marvelous Appalachian twang. I was mesmerized. I sat on the edge of her bed, and we talked for a long time. No more V-tach, but we were already electrically and spiritually connected. It was Christmas, maybe the best Christmas of my life. And I knew it was then time to go home and be with my family.

I saw Faye twice a day on hospital rounds until she was released. After discharge, she decided to continue to see me, despite the fact that she lived 45 miles away from my office and there were plenty of good doctors between my town and hers. I didn't argue. I loved seeing her. She did marvelously the next 5 years that I watched over her. When I moved away, we tearfully exchanged addresses. Every Christmas for the next 10 years I have received an envelope postmarked St. Charles, VA, and each time I anxiously open it. She writes on the front "Walk with Me, Jesus" and on the inside of the card, she writes, "Well Doc, I'm still alive and kickin'."

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