

From CPR to Pen Pals

On an Airplane at LaGuardia Airport

Almost a decade has passed since I was a resident. I trained in a New York City hospital, where code blues were an everyday event. But my most memorable code blue—and one I think about every day—happened just 10 months ago.

I was sitting on an airplane at LaGuardia airport, getting ready to head back to my home in Florida. I had just given a lecture at a New York teaching hospital's grand rounds. The doors of the airplane were shut, and we were about to taxi away from the gate when the overhead speaker came on and the panicked voice of a flight attendant asked if there was a doctor on board. With my husband and two children looking at me, I pushed the call button. A frantic flight attendant dressed in blue came running up to me.

"Please come quickly, a man needs help!" she exclaimed.

A long time has passed since I ran a code (I work as a hematologist/oncologist), but my instincts did not even allow me a chance to think about this. I followed the flight attendant who led me to a man slumped over in his seat. The man was about 65 years old, foaming at the mouth, and blue. On quick assessment, he had no pulse or respirations.

Everything happened so fast: we pulled him into the aisle (Did you ever realize how narrow these aisles really are?). With my finger, I cleaned out his mouth, which was full of a recently aspirated meal. Then I tore off his shirt and tie and began a full-force effort at cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Despite exhausting efforts, he was not responding—no pulse, no respiration. But I kept trying. I looked down at the face of this man I did not know, at his blue lips and pale, cold skin, and the sight pushed me farther and farther. I was in an airplane in New York City, but I felt like I was trying to save a life in the middle of Siberia.

I raided the airplane's first aid kit for epinephrine, begged passengers for nitroglycerin, and I even found some oxygen for my patient. Then, it happened—a breath, a pulse (weak, but present), and finally some color to those blue lips I had been blowing into for what seemed an eternity. The paramedics began arriving and the heavy-duty medical equipment finished what was started. The man was whisked off to a hospital.

Running the code turned out to be the easy part. For weeks afterward, I tried to find out what happened to "Charlie." I called the airline, the hospital, and the airport, but I couldn't get any answers about Charlie's status. I became convinced that he hadn't made it.

Then, the day before Christmas, I received a copy of an article from the *New York Daily News*, with my name highlighted in yellow, and a hand written note at the bottom from Charlie! He had found me. Ever since Charlie tracked me down, we have stayed in touch. We have become pen pals, frequently sending each other cards, letters, and clippings. We have even spoken on the phone.

Charlie went through a quadruple bypass (ironically, at the hospital where I attended medical school and residency) as well as insertion of an implantable defibrillator. Charlie is back to a full life again, including golf, and I feel that I played a role in his enjoyment of life.

Charlie and I are hoping to meet each other again, hopefully somewhere a little bigger than an airplane aisle. In the meantime, I look forward to his letters. Despite my chosen specialty as an oncologist, that day on the airplane with Charlie taught me more in 30 minutes about life and death than my last 15 years as a physician.

Thanks, Charlie.

— Karin P. Bigman, MD
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