

LIFE LESSONS

Patrick Murray, Class of 2015

When I look back now, that day is still a blur. I don't know if I even comprehend what happened during those 8 hours, but I believe telling the story may help me realize its importance.

I started on the Labor and Delivery floor that afternoon. I was very excited because one of the patients I met my first week on the rotation was on the floor and already 8cm dilated. I went into the room and greeted the smiling couple—well, the mother-to-be sort of just grimaced—then asked if I could be there during the delivery to help out. They agreed and I was elated. My first delivery!

An hour later I was scrubbed in. As the doctor coached me on how to catch the baby, the husband and nurses tried to coach the mother through pushing. Energy mounted as the labor progressed, then the mom let out what could best be described

as a battle cry. The husband's eyes rolled back into his head and he nearly passed out at the sound. And there I was, my eyes wide open with amazement, staring at the head of a baby slowly pushing out. I tilted the head down to allow the first shoulder to pop out and then up for the next shoulder, and whoosh! Out came their first baby girl. All the anguish and fainting turned to smiles when those parents heard the wails of their new princess. It was a rush and a feeling I am still stunned by. But within minutes, that feeling vanished.

The doctor grabbed me and dragged me to the next room. Another delivery was already happening down the hall, she let me know, twins in fact! Before she could tell me anything else, she got pulled away and left me to go in alone. I went into the room to introduce myself to the family and suddenly felt a strange heaviness around me. I was confused. Where was the anxious joy? Where were the smiling faces? The mom graciously



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consented to let me stay for the delivery, but then silence resumed and the heavy cloud settled back in place. As time went on, contractions started coming faster. After ten minutes, I understood the somber attitude. The mom began to bawl as she pushed the first child out; it was smaller than my hand and breathless, like a wax statue. It never moved. The doctor began to ask the mom to push again in sobering silence. The next one came and it was just as frail as the previous, like a porcelain doll. At this point I looked up and everyone, including myself, found themselves in tears. We waited as people rushed around with the babies, and I learned the story—the mom had gone into premature labor at 21 weeks. Minutes later, the doctor confirmed what everyone knew: the twins did not survive. The confirmation was still shocking. The mom broke down in earnest. The doctor leaned up to the patient's ears and whispered something that was so moving the woman hugged and thanked her, with tears still rolling down her face. Just as I began to give my condolences, a cacophony of beepers went off.

The doctor, resident, and I rushed out of the room to a STAT C-section. A woman was in eclamptic seizures across the ward and the baby's heart rate plummeted. I barely had time to wipe the tears from my face as I frantically put on the boot covers outside the operating room. As the doctor squared her shoulders and addressed the team, I saw a new side of her. Stern orders, like a general commanding her platoon, came in rapid fire. "This is an emergency," she said. "We have seconds to get this baby out safely. Everyone needs to be focused. No

excuses." Her soldiers were now ready. The incision was made across the abdomen. In moments we were using our hands to move through the layers of tissue and push aside organs. She made one more incision and the meconium, a black-brown substance, spilled everywhere. As I pushed on the top of the stomach, I saw the doctor reach in and pull out a head. This time it was moving. A second later, I was handed a slimy blue alien-looking creature with instructions to walk it over to the NICU staff. As I walked the fifteen feet, all I could think to myself was, "Oh, please don't drop this slippery little smurf!" I handed the baby over just as the new boy let out a banshee cry. I turned back to the OR staff and saw stoic relief behind their masked faces, the closest thing to pure joy you will ever see in an OR. All from that piercing shriek, that sign of life.

That night, and ever since, I've tried to reflect on that day. I feel that in those precious hours I was able to see more than just the spectrum of obstetrician experiences. I was able to see medicine as a whole: the excitement of life, the devastation of death, and in the midst of chaos, poise and determination to find a way to save lives. Medicine is all these experiences. And it was the doctor's ability to keep herself together through the joys and perils of the journey that allowed her to focus on helping the next patient. I can still see the faces of all the babies that day. I hope to take the lessons I learned that day with me so I can manage the different challenges medicine will bring—joy, grief, and possibly chaos—with total clear-headedness and empathy, while still appreciating each and every step along the path.

GLASS RAINBOW

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