

Free at the point of delivery

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In my day to day activity as a GP I teach and learn from my patients, students, peers and colleagues. I enjoy the intellectual and rational discussions and even evidence based debates on the theories we strive to practice. However I always remember the visceral learning that takes place with emotion. The epiphany came the day that I learnt the value of trust in a professional and the kindness of strangers.

Aaaarrgghhh, 'Please stop the car!'

My wife, Vivien, was already opening the door as I pulled up to the hospital. I ran for the bag as she lumbered out of the seat her pregnant frame impeding her exit.

'Quick before another contraction comes'

Holding her tight around her shoulders we moved slowly to the entrance. My mind was racing. A sleepless night of contractions had left me dithering. Usually I entered hospitals with a confident swagger, walking past lost visitors who moved cautiously, unsure of their destination. Now I was the one looking around, where to turn, anxious with the fear of events to come. We had been to this hospital several times for scans and even a tour of the delivery suite, but my hyper-alert state couldn't remember where we were supposed to go. I gazed moronically up at the signs and began to head to the stairs leading to the maternity ward.

'You must be joking' moaned my wife through gritted teeth, looking up at the flight of steep steps.

As she said that another contraction tore at her and she cried out doubling over. The busy hubbub of the hospital entrance seemed to quiet as people turned to stare at the commotion.

From nowhere a lady appeared and held Vivien's other arm. 'This way love'. She calmly directed and with poise began to move us to the lifts hidden around the corner.

'It's this way now, just get to the lifts. All right my love, deep slow breaths it will pass'. 'Just hold on tight to me.'

The relief at a helping hand and kind touch was palpable. I heaved the night bag and the lady took control of Vivien, jostling others out of the way guiding us.

She looked up at me 'Her first?'

I mutely nodded

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‘Alright sweetheart they’ll give you the gas and air soon, just you take short steps.’

Her tone and manner was assured and comforting, the lady helped us into the lift and as the doors closed and the contraction began to ease Vivien smiled weakly at our rescuer.

It was only then I finally noticed that this lady was in a dressing gown and hospital robe. On one wrist was a hospital bracelet on the other hand a cannula.

Entering the labour ward we were soon cocooned in a comfort blanket of midwives, equipment, knowledge and expertise with even a constant presence of a student midwife bringing feelings of security rather than intrusion.

Happily Zak was born kicking and screaming into the world later that day to lots of fuss and attention. The routine miracle of birth was a tumultuous journey of fear and joy and despite my paediatric past I felt as naïve as any first time father watching his baby son being born. Actions that seemed mundane when I had performed them clinically were now filled with wonder and amazement. The staff helped me with cutting my sons umbilical cord, dressing him for the first time, counting his fingers and measuring his weight.

This experience taught me a new found respect for families and mothers but more than an empathy with my patients I have began to feel a commonality with them. A shared understanding how life events affect us all equally.

We as doctors are in the privileged position of guiding people at the most stressful points in their life at times of physical distress and crisis of emotional and existential origin. It is then that I remember the incipient moments in my life and what they have taught me. By understanding the depths of desperation in a desperate moment I can for a brief time hope to share with them their sorrow and lighten the burden.

Time makes patients of us all one day through the natural processes of birth, death and sickness. Maybe when that time comes we are all reliant on the kindness of strangers.