Not Pulseless After All

In a Veterans Affairs Hospital

As an intern at a veterans affairs hospital, the first patient I was called upon to resuscitate was a looming hulk of a man with terrible lung disease. Bronchospasm started around 4 AM, and respiratory distress ensued. As our nebulizer treatments clearly became futile, I summoned the resident from the medical intensive care unit. The patient, now wild eyed and with pursed lips, was retracting all of his considerable chest muscles but barely moving any air that I could auscultate.

The resident and I assumed that respiratory arrest was imminent and summoned the code team. As the team gathered, the patient slipped into unresponsiveness. We yelled into his ear, telling him to clasp his hand, but he was motionless. A respiratory technician began to bag ventilate him.

During the commotion, a code team member who was clutching the patient's wrist shouted, "No pulse!" The resident put her hand on the patient's neck, palpated for a moment, and then turned to me. "Start CPR," she commanded.

I began chest compressions just as I had been taught, and I looked at the resident for confirmation that I was performing the compressions correctly. At that moment, the patient's arm slid up between my arms and toward my throat. His burly hand grabbed me by the shirt collar, near the knot of my tie, and proceeded to lift me so that my arms could no longer compress his chest. He then deposited me at the bedside.

"Guess he wasn't pulseless after all," the resident quipped.

— Mark Swaim, MD, PhD
Durham, NC

Copyright 2000 by Turner White Communications Inc., Wayne, PA. All rights reserved.