

The Girl with a Tiger Tattoo

In an Emergency Department

It happened one day, halfway through my second year as an emergency medicine resident. I was training in a community hospital. The radio went off. Priority 1—17-year-old female, motor vehicle accident, unrestrained front seat passenger, 34 weeks pregnant. Agonal respirations, cardiopulmonary resuscitation in progress, estimated time of arrival 4 minutes. We immediately paged the obstetrics resident to the emergency department. The patient arrived, blue and pulseless. We continued the resuscitation. The obstetrics resident checked for fetal heart tones—he heard them. He opened a tray and performed a crash cesarean section. The baby was successfully resuscitated and later flown to a tertiary care center. The young woman had significant intra-abdominal hemorrhage and was never revived from asystole.

The attending physician came to the grieving room with me to deliver the news to the woman's mother. I summarized the accident and informed her that her

daughter did not survive; however, we were able to get the baby out. The baby was alive. The parent then looked me squarely in the eye and told me her daughter was not pregnant. My heart stopped. Could I have made such a horrible mistake? My attending quickly intervened and asked her if her daughter had a tiger tattoo on her right shoulder. She said yes.

The mother was taken to the bedside and positively identified her daughter. To this day, I still don't recall seeing the tattoo. We later learned that the young woman had moved out of her mother's house several months earlier to hide her pregnancy.

This incident taught me to pay attention to detail and not get caught up in only 1 aspect of any resuscitation. It also reminds me again and again just how precious life really is.

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