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# The miracles of life and the tragedies of death



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An unwed mother underwent an illegal abortion and delivered a live 500- gram foetus. Someone noted a moving 'product' in the dustbin and brought it to our hospital. As a basic relief manoeuvre, the foetus got a table and a small bulb above for warmth. Everyone waited for the child to stop moving. It did not for 48 hours. So, we put an oxygen mask on the child and started feeding through a tube.

Undoubtedly, it surprised everyone as the girl refused to die – defying all scientific rules. The staff started feeding her randomly whenever any member had the time. The attempt was to make the baby comfortable in the 'last moments', which were simply not coming.

The cry became increasingly vigorous and we started a more planned sort of feeding. The only question, a mixture of hope and apparent cruelty, in the hospital those days was, 'Is she gone?' The answer remained firmly in the negative.

Later, the hospital owner took the girl to her house and started wonderful personal care. Six months later, she weighed a healthy 3 kg. Along the way were a few collapses, some near-death episodes, and a miraculous recovery each time.

A good couple later adopted the child. The child did not have the slightest physical or mental abnormality at one year of age, which is when we last saw her. This child who had no business to live defied every single law of medicine.

As a side story; the husband came to know about his wife's pre-marital affair and left her. The sad mother, facing loneliness and isolation, came to know that her attempted abortion had failed and made a gentle attempt to reclaim her child. But her parents simply dissuaded her from that.

Another child underwent a complex surgery related to an absent food-pipe, a condition called oesophageal atresia. The surgical aspect was fine, but she had repeated post-operative collapses and went thrice on a ventilator. The unhappy parents accused us of neglect and improper care as their child was under the government insurance scheme. We were upset, but honouring the parental wishes, shifted the child to a private higher-level hospital in a bigger city.

Money quickly became an issue for the family and they got the baby discharged against medical advice after a few days. They did not come back to us, neither did they go to the government sector as they were advised to do. The family took the child home to die. In the village, the family underwent heavy criticism for bringing a dying child out of the hospital. They ran back to the same hospital with a blue, almost lifeless, child. The child revived after resuscitation and ventilation was re-started.

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help the family out. A very upset father finally took the child away, against medical advice, a second time.

We felt sad and helpless. These are typically difficult times for legally challenged doctors while dealing alone with unusual, aggrieved or sometimes violent families. Society, the media or the law-enforcement agencies simply stamp us guilty until proved otherwise; and this is scary and depressing. A few weeks later I received a message that the child was doing well and feeding happily. A granny in the village had removed all tubes and started feeding as a solace in the 'end moments' of the crying child. The child, however, had help from other powers. There was no end-moment. One doctor commented wryly after all this saga, "Despite our best efforts, the child survived."

A doctor comes across miracles all his life; hopeless cases turning around wonderfully. The reverse also occurs disturbingly. An otherwise perfectly healthy person just collapses after just a minor intervention; an anaphylactic drug reaction sometimes, or a pre-existing undetected condition manifesting suddenly. In infants, aspiration of food contents into the wind-pipe with sudden death is one of the most distressing events which can happen to the child and the family. And if it happens in a hospital setting, the doctor has a torrid time too.

I realise quite clearly after some years of practice that life and death have their own methods of play beyond the understanding of humans, including doctors. Bless the few doctors who either say, 'I am god' or 'there is no god.' I have joined the majority – surrendering to a higher power – as patients and diseases often- times disregard text books and scientific journals.

The miracles of life and the tragedies of death happen so regularly in a doctor's life that I sometimes wonder if we even have a role to play! We think it a cliché when we see on a doctor's prescription, 'I treat and He cures.' But, years down the line, I say, this is the only truth in medicine.

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