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A Delivery Note

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After delivering the baby, I sat down to chart. Adrenaline still rushed through me. We had just witnessed and performed a heroic act: A patient, in my care for nine months had pushed out a brand-new human being. Every birth is a perfect explosion of pain, power, and pride. Each delivery reminds me of why I do what I do. Now, I had to reduce all of that into the driest medical language. I stared at the paragraph I had typed up and felt ridiculous. What had just happened in the room deserved a lot more than this:

Called by nursing staff at 6:15 a.m. about pt being complete. Arrived at bedside 6:17 a.m., and pt expressed ready to push. She then pushed with excellent maternal effort for about 10 minutes, and the head of the baby delivered spontaneously. Nuchal cord was checked and absent. The shoulder then delivered spontaneously. Baby was placed on the abdomen of the mother per her request to perform skin to skin. Time of Birth 6:32 a.m.

I went home and kept writing.

“Dr. Zha, please come.” It was 6:15 a.m. when the charge nurse called, the tone of her voice as brief and certain as the gallop of a baby’s heart-

beat. This was my cue to book it. I jumped out of bed, put on scrubs, and hopped into my car.

I arrived at the hospital at 6:17. Without wasting time, I put on a sterile gown and gloves. Only then did I direct my full attention to the anticipating faces of Thalia (name changed for confidentiality), her partner, and the bedside nurse. “Are we ready to push?” I asked.

I always rush to the bedside after receiving a “your patient is dilated to 10 cm” call, even when the nurse’s tone indicates there isn’t a rush. It’s a habit I’ve formed over the years, especially after missing a few precipitous deliveries. Plus, I think it amuses people to see their doctor hurry into the room, hair uncombed and short of breath. One time, after just putting on my Wonder Woman Halloween costume, I received such a duty call. When I flew into the patient’s room in a cape, all the shocked mother could do was laugh. Naturally, I did the baby’s 12-month wellness visit in the same outfit.

Thalia smiled to indicate that she was glad to see me. Within a second, the smile turned into that maternal determination I had come to know so well over the years. I offered none of the advice I would usually give a first-time mother: how to hold her epidural-heavy legs with her hands, or how to tuck her chin into her chest while holding her breath to push. This was Thalia’s third baby. She had done this before. She was ready to do it again. If my delivery note came close to doing anyone justice that morning, it was the “excellent maternal effort” part.

Thalia rode the wave of each contraction until it reached the zenith, then sharply inhaled before channeling all her force into the pelvic floor as the waves crashed down. Then, when the water was calm again, Thalia instinctively relaxed her whole body, letting her limbs fall onto the bed, and her eyelids give in to gravity. The room slipped into silence as Thalia enjoyed the deep, still water. Every time she reopened her eyes, she would give me a slight nod, as if to say, “Hold on tight, here comes a rocky one.”

I would nod back. “Alright captain, ready when you are.”

At this point, Thalia had made enough progress that with each push, I could see more of the baby’s head. “Oh wow, he has lots of hair!” I teased. People love to imagine their babies’ hair—or the lack thereof, in some cases. Thalia giggled, which engaged her abdominal muscles and pushed the baby’s head out even more. Laughter always helps.

When the top part of the head became visible just outside of the birth canal, Thalia moaned for the first time. The epidural couldn’t numb the burning sensation of the skin. Panicked by the pain, she looked to me for guidance. “Thalia, you are almost there.” I said. “Don’t be afraid of the burning. Push through it.”

I put my hand on the top part of the baby’s head to prevent tearing and locked eyes with Thalia again. “You got this, mama.” I whispered. She nodded, her unstoppable maternal determination resurfacing. Thalia transformed her moaning into another deep breath. She grabbed her legs

from behind and let the forceful wave plunge down and through her body, engulfing everything in its wake. Just like that, I found myself holding the head of the baby between my hands.

“Thalia, stop, stop!” I shouted at the almost-new-mother who was now nearly sitting up from the bed, recruiting all her working muscles to squeeze out a new life.

She stopped. I fitted my fingers between the baby’s head and Thalia’s vagina, to feel for any umbilical cord around the baby’s neck, which, if present, I would need to unwrap so that it didn’t choke the baby. I found none. I docked my fingers in a position that allowed me to cup the baby’s head between my palms and widened my stance for the tidal wave.

The most critical moment during a delivery is when the head is out and it’s time to deliver the widest part of a baby: the shoulders. If the shoulders get stuck, it becomes life-threatening to both the baby and the mother. In other words, this next push was critical.

I looked up at Thalia again, whose eager eyes met mine. “Okay,” I said. “Give me the biggest push you’ve got. Now!”

Then came the moment of truth: not “Can she do it?”, but “Is the world ready?”

The monstrous wave was coming to a head. Thalia filled her lungs and bore down to become one with it. I provided downward traction on the baby’s head to help him exit the final wave without crashing into shore. When the shoulders delivered, I was certain that everybody in the room

could hear the ocean rushing out, sweeping their breath away with it.

I moved my hands under the slippery newborn's armpits and transferred him to Thalia's belly. She cried as she took her son in her arms for the first time. Then I used a clean towel to rub his little back, in an effort to stimulate his cry. I whispered my mantra for these long few seconds, "Cry, baby, cry," until that first wail burst from his lungs—his own little wave. This marked the initial breath of the newborn, and the return of mine.

Thalia's whole body shook as she let out her tears of happiness. "You did it, Thalia!" I smiled under my mask. For the first time, Thalia didn't look to me for reassurance or direction. She didn't need it anymore. She couldn't take her eyes off this little human she was holding: her new son.

The room was quiet again, except for the rhythmic breathing of the baby. Thalia held the baby onto her chest, warming his little body with her embrace. She rocked him gently, like tides caressing the beach. Then she kissed him on the forehead. I have seen that first kiss many times by now. It's a mother's promise that from this moment on, no matter how far away her child drifts away in the ocean of life, he can always turn to her, and see the shore.

About the Author

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