

## **Happy First Birthday**

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For the past eight months, I have had the heartache and blessing of working exclusively with pre- and post-transplant patients. I've experienced the joy of seeing a patient receive an organ after months of being artificially maintained in the ICU, I've felt the crushing letdown of watching a patient's illness overtake them before an organ offer comes through, and I've supported these individuals and their families through it all.

In my time learning about this patient population, one of the greatest struggles I've witnessed is the postoperative rehabilitation and recovery. These patients know they will likely be facing a series of surgeries, but each return to the operating room, each setback with infection, nausea, medication reactions is increasingly discouraging for them. It is my job to motivate these patients and inspire in them a thankfulness for the exceptional gift they've been given. I have never been so rewarded as when I was able to celebrate a post-transplant birthday with a patient – an opportunity I've had three times thus far.

I'm reminded of one particular patient who struggles greatly with engaging in her recovery – she had become ill very quickly and at a fairly young age, due to a disease over which she had no control. She experienced changes in her physical appearance due to medications, a decreased ability to participate in activities she enjoyed, and a loss of the ability to work in a job she was passionate about. The understandable emotional difficulty that came from these losses continued to affect her after she received her transplant, and the staff had great difficulty engaging her in her recovery. She refused therapy, was not receptive to teaching, and was overwhelmingly negative about all of the equipment and procedures required following the initial surgery.

I undertook the challenge of caring for her for five consecutive days, with the hope of maintaining consistent expectations, earning her trust, and coming to an understanding of how to best motivate and support her. As it happened, one of these days was her birthday. I understood that she could benefit from a reason to smile, so I rallied my coworkers and we spent a few dollars on a birthday banner, artificial flowers, and brightly-colored fuzzy socks.

When we sang "Happy Birthday" and presented her gifts, I recognized an opportunity: I used the occasion to talk to her about the gift of a second chance that she had received through transplant. I was a difficult conversation to have, but one that I believe was very necessary for her to hear.

Once her room was empty and quiet, I wished her a "happy first birthday," and she questioned what I meant by that. I sat down at her bedside and gently reminded her that this birthday, post-transplant, hadn't been a guarantee a few months ago. We spoke about the incredible sacrifice and ultimate final gift of organ donation given by someone she would never meet. I let her know that the best way to honor this gift is to take the best possible care of herself and her body. I told her that the benevolence of this stranger was absolutely worth her maximal effort in ensuring a successful recovery, that their memory deserved that and so much more. We shed tears together, she shared her fears, and she found her strength in the realization that this was truly the "first birthday" of a whole new life.

That day, and every day from then on, she got up to the chair, she walked, she participated in every teaching session – it wasn't always smooth sailing, but I would hope that the respect and gratitude I inspired in her helped to carry her all the way to her successful discharge home.