

## FRESH EYES

## A matter of priority

*Cuestión de prioridad*

Ana Morales Real

-What do you mean you can't get up?

-Help me, Mom, it hurts so much.

If we weren't on vacation, I would have thought this was an excuse of yours to skip training.

But it wasn't that, she was pale and a tear was running down her chin, but just one.

- Get up slowly and lean on me; you didn't warm up before swimming yesterday, it might be just a contracture," I told her so as not to worry her.

She responded with a wince of pain.

Hunching over, she could only take three steps, puzzled between local cold, dry heat, relaxing gel or oral anti-inflammatory, I opted to go to the Maternity Hospital.

I asked the neighbor to take care of my little daughter until her father came to pick her up.

-Take some supplies with you, because you never know when you'll leave the emergency room," she told me jokingly.

The cab driver dropped me off at the hospital entrance and there I grabbed an emergency entertainment kit: sudoku, crossword puzzles and a liter and a half bottle of water. With these and the book I had brought from home, I was ready to handle the three hours that, according to my calculations, we would be spending there.

I gave brief explanations at the reception desk of why we were in the emergency room and the health card details.

-Go to the front room and wait to be called.

This was the beginning of something called triage, a word I was hearing for the first time and which sounded to me like a three-way competition.

I hadn't opened the Sudoku book yet by the moment my daughter got called. The interview in a small room was quick and our explanation to the nurse, somewhat more detailed. She wrote down what I was telling her and I don't remember if she also took my daughter's temperature. After that, she referred us to another much larger room:

-Go into that room over there - she pointed with her finger. The room opposite was a hive of activity: snot and coughs mingled with the fussing of angry parents because those who entered the consultation

room were slow to leave; others, when they came out, said that they had been given less time than the previous ones; there were also those who were delighted, because they had been prescribed lots of medicine.

There was a whole family there caring for a child with a rash. Strategically deployed, they stood at every exit or doorway where someone who looked like a doctor might appear.

My daughter was sitting in a wheelchair wearing a sweater with a sticker with her name written on, and mine had a sticker which I think said "Chaperone".

-Hey, four of them came in after us," shouted the grandmother of the rashed child.

-Ma'am, it doesn't work like that, please be patient," a warden reassured her.

-How does it work, because the child who just came in doesn't look that bad, and look at my grandson, he's on fire.

-They have given him an antihistamine and he can wait, there are other more urgent cases, ma'am, and try to lower down your voice, there are sick children.

-What are you telling me, that my grandson is not so important?!

-What I'm telling you is that if you keep shouting, you'll have to go outside, there can only be one companion per patient, and I'm turning a blind eye to you.

For a moment I thought the lady would go for the warden's jugular, but she limited herself to telling other recently arrived relatives about the rash:

-And no one here takes any notice of us! -She tried to update her relatives and the rest of the room.

The waiting time was long and although enlivened by the family scene, it was finally our turn. We made our way to the consultation room, guarded by the murderous gaze of the super-grandmother:

-Surely, she is a plugged-in, she has arrived much later than us -some nodded, most ignored her.

When we went to the consultation room, the murmur continued in the background. For a moment I thought about how hard it must be to work here with such demanding people and how complicated it is to take care of patients with no time to disconnect from the previous ones.

**Author Affiliations:** Hospital de Andalucía, Málaga, Spain.

**Author Contributions:** All authors have confirmed their authorship in the author responsibilities document, publication agreement, and assignment of rights to EMERGENCIAS.

**Autor para correspondencia:** Ana Morales Real. Hospital de Andalucía, Málaga, Spain.

**Email:** moralesreal@gmail.com

**Article Information:** Received: 25-6-2022. Accepted: 30-6-2022. Online: 18-10-2022.

**Editor in Charge:** Antoni Juan Pastor.

A doctor felt her spine from the sacrum to the neck:  
-Turn your head to the right, now to the left, slowly, tilt it back, now forward.

She continued with all the joints, and concluded by sending her a spinal x-ray and a CBC.

-When the results are in, we will call you back, wait in the same room," she added.

It was starting to get lively, the boy with the rash kept throwing coins into the vending machine and now it was the grandfather who was threatening the security guard.

This time I opted to kill time with the crossword puzzles as sudoku needs more concentration; I was finishing the second one when we were called to the previous room. There was a different doctor who, after examining the X-ray and studying the CBC, made a call to another colleague. I noticed that the attention took on a different tone, there was no rushing, and the questions were more specific:

-Have you had a fever in the last two weeks?

-Yes, we had to go to the health center because she had a high fever, but she alternated ibuprofen with paracetamol and the next morning she was fine.

- Hasn't she complained about having pain all this time? -Not really.

-Have you been in contact with animals in the last twenty to thirty days?

-At the farm school, and yes, about twenty days ago.

A man in a white coat had joined this interrogation. Judging by his voice, he must have been the colleague on the other end of the phone. He also examined the tests, looked at the doctor and confirmed:

-This is not from trauma.

He then told me that my daughter had to get a scan. From then on, all I could see was the movement of his lips telling me something I did not want to hear. Then more doctors came around. I could see them passing the reports and examining the scanner, pointing, commenting, and looking at each other in silence. This took much longer than the waiting time in the first room.

The same doctor who told me about the scan approached me in a deep voice:

-She must stay hospitalized.

Silence again. Not only could I not hear, but neither could I speak.

-It's not a contracture, is it? – I wanted to ask, but I don't think I was able to articulate it.

-We have detected something in the spine and we must act immediately.

Something rumbled in my head, uncertainty tends to make anxious.

They acted immediately; before I recovered my speech, we were both in a room with three other children and their respective mothers looking after them. They were not crying, but I certainly was, which made me feel even worse.

It was the twenty-seventh of December and it wasn't until the twenty-eighth that I stopped crying.

She had an IV and that same night they started a course of antibiotics. By the next morning, there were tests and more tests, phone calls, lots of patience. I found myself laughing with the other mothers and feeling that everything was going to be fine.

Finally, with the results of the thousands of tests, the uncertain was given a name. It was called bacteria and the immediate application of antibiotic treatment that in the doctor's words, "was conclusive".

In two days, the four bed neighbors, the occupants of the armchairs and I became a small family. We measured the hours by the visits of the medical staff and the sound of the wheels of the food carts. We celebrated the slightest progress, and we all cheered the first day my daughter walked to the bathroom, clutching the IV pole with her back straight.

We were still waiting for the scan appointment, which was scheduled for January 2nd.

We spent New Year's Eve in the hospital, but there were no sad faces. The staff on duty toasted at twelve o'clock in the next room, where they used to rest and drink coffee. They didn't look sad either, even though they had to work on the days they could be celebrating with their families. Nevertheless, I was feeling as if were hosted by the best.

My daughter was improving with the treatment, all that remained was the result of the "gamma", as the doctors used to call it, and hopefully she would get to spend Christmas Eve at home. The doctor had taken it as a personal duty, she believe that was a magical night for children.

'Do not move' they instructed my daughter as they were performing the scan. And despite the cold in the room, she didn't. "One step forward" I thought to myself as I crossed my fingers, now we just had to wait.

The results would be ready the eve of Epiphany (an important celebration for children here in Spain) according to the doctor. But the reports would not arrive until the sixth, "it is an administrative matter, and the offices close on the fifth".

I don't know how, but on the eve of Epiphany she got the results, and my daughter slept that night hugging her sister, excited about hearing the camels crossing the corridor, as a part of the tradition.

The bacteria could have settled in any part of the body, visible or not. It is usually caught in places amongst farm animals. My daughter had collected manure at the farm school and gave the bacteria a ride to our home between two vertebrae.

The accuracy of the diagnosis and the speed of treatment meant that the activity of the bacteria was attenuated and did not damage the spine with more serious and irreversible lesions.

I could apologize to the family of the boy with the rash because he was treated later than us, but I prefer to thank the emergency room staff for giving my daughter priority.