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The secret of successful transfusion

IT'S LIKE this, you see...your little baby, he's got too much of this thing called bilirubin in his blood, that's what's making him yellow. He's still so little isn't he? Only four days old. At his age, it could hurt his brain. He could be permanently retarded. We could try and cure him by performing a blood transfusion. But we'll need your consent. If you don't want to give your consent, we could try other methods, but there's no doubt that a transfusion would be the best. So that's what we'd like to do — providing you agree of course...' 

That was the best I could do. I couldn't make it any clearer to her. If I'd introduced any more medical terminology, she'd only have got more confused. She was already in tears.

'There there, sshhh, don't cry. Your son was born here at this hospital wasn't he?'

'Y...y...yes.'
‘There, there. So? What do you think? Do you want to discuss it with your husband?’
‘He’s...he’s...he’s off travelling.’
‘Not on business, though?’ I wanted to check if he was a friend.
‘Yes — he’s gone away with his work.’
‘Oh...I see.’
I could see he was not our friend.\(^1\)
‘Well, in that case, it’s down to you. I’ve explained to you what we think would be the best treatment for your son, but you’ll have to decide.’
I didn’t want to force her into agreeing.
‘Well in that case Doctor, I’ll give you my consent.’
‘OK, good. In that case, could you sign here please?’
She did not take my proffered ball-pen. Instead, she quickly rolled her thumb on the ink-pad and put a thumb-print on the spot I was pointing at. She was clearly used to doing it. My ball-pen was left dangling in mid-air.

\(^{1}\)\textit{Readers would understand ‘travelling without business’ as a euphemism for being a political prisoner. ‘Away on business’ in this instance signifies that the man is a soldier at the frontier.}
friends.

His father, on the other hand, was most definitely no friend of mine. Enemy, more like. But he was my own compatriot — surely I shouldn’t look on him as an enemy? Perhaps no — but he was no friend to my friends. He had sworn at them, abused them, tortured them and persecuted them. He had thrown them out of their jobs and ruined their lives. I was upset for them and angry too. I didn’t see why I should lose a night’s sleep on account of the child of one of my friends’ oppressors. Let him suffer too.

No — that’s wrong. I’d never even met the father of this baby. He might not be a friend, but that didn’t make him an enemy. I couldn’t be sure that he was one of the ones who had been cruel to my friends. He might even be one of our own people. And even if he had mistreated my friends, why should his baby son suffer as a result? I was a professional, not a mercenary, even if you couldn’t say the same of other people. And anyway, ‘revenge’ isn’t a word in my vocabulary or that of my friends.

Revenge might not be, but what about retaliation? Why shouldn’t I retaliate? These people have ruined the lives, the health, the sanity of my friends. And after all, the mother hadn’t been too keen to give consent for her baby to have the transfusion even though she knew it was for the best. Maybe we could just give the baby lots of fluid, and see if that got the percentage of bilirubin down to 17 by morning. Then there would be no need for a transfusion. And I could get a good night’s sleep. I knew my colleagues would understand. At worst, the child’s brain could be affected. Maybe he wouldn’t be able to write his own name — but in that, he’d be no worse off than his mother, whose brain wasn’t affected. He could follow his father’s footsteps into the army — you didn’t need a brain that worked to be a soldier. Even if you did have a brain in that job, they stopped you using it.

No, no, I shouldn’t think like this. What was I turning into? This poor baby was only four days old. So little. If I left him overnight at 22 per cent without doing anything, tomorrow morning the bilirubin could well have shot up to 29 or 30 per cent. It surely wasn’t right that people like me, the so-called best brains, should leave it until the toxins were too high before deciding to perform a transfusion. Could I honestly condemn this baby of four days to grow up with a body
which would develop but a brain which wouldn’t, that would leave him reliant on others for the rest of his life? He might not even live as long as his father. And anyway, who could say that he would not use his brains for our benefit? No matter who his father and mother were. He was just a blameless four-day-old baby. He hadn’t ruined anyone’s life — why should I ruin his?

I ran through the arguments in my mind, acting as prosecutor, defence lawyer, witness and judge for this four-day-old baby against whom I was filing a suit. I judged that I should carry out the transfusion. To be honest, though, my colleagues had already decided that for me, and these deliberations were only in my mind.

So I requested blood from the blood bank. After about 40 minutes, we still hadn’t received a reply so I went myself to check what the matter was. It turned out that they were out of blood. They suggested I try Rangoon General, although they said in the same breath that RGH probably wouldn’t have any either as it was a rare type. Never mind. I was determined to sort this out so I made the arrangements myself to get the blood from RGH. I got busy around midnight and my colleagues weren’t happy with me for not helping out. But I kept on, and didn’t take a break until the car sped off to collect the blood from RGH.

I went into the common room and revived myself with a drink of water and a biscuit. Then I took a look at myself in the mirror and gave myself a thumbs-up sign, pleased with my achievements. I noted that my left thumb appeared in the mirror as a right thumb.

The two thumbs brought back memories of the recent past, and memories of a friend of mine. Someone who I thought more of than any other friend. I saw our two thumbs in the mirror.

The last time I saw him was the first time we had met for a long time, although at one time I saw him almost daily. I had been missing him badly. Our last meeting was an occasion of great sadness. He was the patient. I was the doctor. But sadly he was not my patient. All I could

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2Author’s note: A writer who had gone to jail. Translator’s note: Ma Thida is almost certainly referring to Maung Thawka, the writer who was jailed in 1989 for 20 years and died in RGH in June 1991, having been transferred there from Insein Jail. Ma Thida met him briefly when he was transferred to RGH.
do was give him a quick examination and offer him a few brief words of encouragement. I saw how he was suffering, but all I could say was ‘Are you OK?’ The pain in my chest on seeing him felt like the pain in his own heart as he lay there.

I had taken his pulse holding his wrist in my hand. His thumb pressed hard against mine. I stared at it. Then I placed my hand on his upper arm and raised my head to look him in the eye. We looked at one another, our eyes full of recognition and understanding. We said everything through our hands and our eyes. And that was it. I never saw him again. I was meant to be measuring his pulse. Instead, I ended up measuring the force of his commitment and the depth of his suffering.

It was almost 1am by the time the car brought the blood back from RGH. One of my colleagues would perform the transfusion. My job was to check and record progress on the transfusions, the baby’s pulse rate, respiration and other vital signs. At 1.15am I let him know we were ready to get started.

The baby had been strapped down to a special X-shaped bed. His legs and arms were spread out and tied down with strips of white cloth wrapped around his wrists to stop him from wriggling and kicking. Even before we got started, he was bawling and screaming his head off. His mother was in tears. Looking at the two of them reminded me that someone had once said: ‘Undeservedly you will atone for the sins of your fathers.’

His umbilical cord was slightly infected so it would have caused problems to inject a local anaesthetic through there, particularly with the wound healing. So we performed the operation without anaesthetic and the child bawled his eyes out. He couldn’t move though, or kick. I wondered if this was the ultimate in suffering for the sins of the past.

I wondered what I could do to try and calm him down. Should I try to explain to him that it wouldn’t be long, it would all be over soon. Would he understand? Would he believe me, even if he understood? ‘Soon’ for me would seem like a lifetime to someone as young as him. Nor could I say ‘Now be brave and this won’t hurt a bit’ which is what...
we would say to an older child before giving him an injection in the buttoc. I knew that this would hurt this baby a lot. I couldn’t lie to him even if others might. So what could I do?

I reached beneath the sterilised cloths and stroked his forehead. It didn’t do much good. He kept on crying, his little face red with anger and pain. I stroked his cheeks, his ears. I tried to give him some water. But he refused the drink and wouldn’t stop crying.

My colleague was putting the finishing touches to the stitches. The little one kept on crying, even though he was exhausted. In fact, he probably didn’t even realise how tired he must be, because he just cried and cried without taking the time to stop and think. The pain was so great it made him forget his exhaustion and just made him cry and cry. Hang on in there, little one. It’ll be all over soon.

I stroked his ear again. He suddenly reacted to it, in astonishment and surprise, and tried to wriggle towards me, but the bandages were too tight. Then, with amazing strength, despite the ties around his wrist, he made a grab for my hand. He grasped my thumb tightly in his fist and wouldn’t let go. There was no point in my trying to extricate myself. My thumb had done the trick. His sobbing died down. It seemed that my thumb was what he had been waiting for all this time.

Thanks to my colleagues’ skill, the baby’s bilirubin-poisoned blood — the blood of his parents — was successfully exchanged for clean blood free of contamination. I wish you well little one. I hope that you will put your cleansed brain to useful work. I hope that your newly cleansed heart will stay pure. I hope that the strength you have derived from my thumb, and the truth which passed to you from me and the thumbs of my friends will continue to flow in your veins.

And I hope and believe that one day we will become friends, you and I. How can it be otherwise, now that our thumbs have touched? 

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