Chhayankan (Visual Art)

Single-mom adventures with autism: living through my son's surgery

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When my 6-year-old son started randomly screaming in pain, it was not immediately apparent what was wrong. My son, whose autism severely limits his communication, could not tell me what was causing his agony. After a whole day of seeing him hold his jaw and run away in fear when I tried to examine his mouth, I realized that he had a toothache and we went to his dentist.

Dental visits are a routine which usually involve me sitting in the “Minions”-decorated chair while holding my son in a wrestling grip so that the dentist can have a quick look before he wriggles from my grasp. It did not take much time that day to find out that he had advanced tooth decay in many of his baby teeth. The dentist told me straightaway that he needed oral surgery.

My son and I are lucky to have an understanding dental surgeon but for many practitioners, dealing with pediatric patients on the autism spectrum can be difficult. Autistic children can react badly to sensory stimuli, may not be able to understand or to communicate their concerns, and can have a lot of anxiety about medical procedures. They can be uncooperative and often require sedation or general anesthaisa for even minor dental procedures.

Patients on the autism spectrum are common in the medical field but they aren’t well represented in graphic novels or in the medical literature. Graphic medicine - exploring medical issues through comics - is an accessible approach that explores illness from the perspective of the patient, the caregiver, or the healthcare provider. The reader can more clearly visualise the struggle. Triumphs, setbacks, tragedies, treatments, and all the events in between - the human element, in other words - are added to the narrative of the illness.

By sharing this story, I hope to evoke awareness about being a caregiver to an autistic individual. If one parent with an autistic child (and there are millions of us out there) can read this and feel less alone, this story will have done its job.

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My son is autistic.

He's six but operates at a preschool level...

He loves brushing his hair, hates brushing his teeth. Navigating his idiosyncrasies is part of my...

Single mom adventures.

A A A A A R R R.

He's going to need surgery. He has extensive damage.
Surgery?

There are issues going on with all his molars.

How often do you brush his teeth?

Oh... uh...

Yaara

Chomp!

Ow! My hand! You bit my hand!

Mommy angry.
BRUSHING HIS TEETH ISA VERY DIFFICULT.
I UNDERSTAND.
MY OFFICE WILL CONTACT YOU ABOUT THE SURGERY.

SURGERY'S GONNA COST THOUSANDS.
I KNOW HE'S COVERED BY MY WORK INSURANCE, BUT...

ELEVATOR!

YES SWEETIE, DO YOU WANT TO TAKE THE ELEVATORS DOWN?
ELEVATOR!
ELEVATOR!

THERE'S A 3 GRAND DEDUCTIBLE THROUGH.
THAT'S GOING TO SET ME BACK.

Jump
Jump
Jump
Jump
ON THE DAY OF THE SURGERY MY SON WAS VERY WELL-BEHAVED.

OH GOOD, IT'S A SPACE.

THOUGH I DIDN'T KNOW IF HE UNDERSTOOD COMPLETELY WHAT WAS ABOUT TO HAPPEN.

SWEETIE, THE TOOTH DOCTOR WILL GIVE YOU MEDICINE TO MAKE YOU SLEEPY AND THEN TALK OUT ALL THOSE TEETH THAT HURT YOU... TEETH THAT HURT YOU.

YES! AND AFTER IT'S DONE, WE'LL GO HOME AND YOU CAN HAVE ALL THE POPSICLES AND JELLO YOU WANT!

ELEVATOR!
ELEVATOW!
ELEVATOW!!

NOT NOW SWEETIE,
PEDIATRIC ORAL
SURGERY IS DOWN
THIS WAY.

THE NURSE PUT
MY SON IN
HOSPITAL
Pajamas.

SO HE'S HAD
NOTHING
TO EAT SINCE LAST
NIGHT?

N O T H I N G AT A L L.

SEE TOOF
DOCTOR

W O W ! Y O U R E
BEING SUCH
A GOOD BOY?

SEE
DOCTOR.

Y E S , W E R E
GOING TO
SEE THE
DOCTOR NOW!
I held him in my lap as they used gas to sedate him.

Deep breaths, okay?

He didn't struggle but he didn't like it either.

All done? Just a few more breaths buddy.

Okay, he's getting noodle-y. Let's put him on the table.
I was about to flee when...

Do you want to give him a kiss?

I did not want to kiss him. It seemed too much like a "goodbye."

I was already playing pediatric surgery horror stories in my head.

I kissed his unconscious cheek and ran.
I WALKED QUICKLY OFF SO THAT THE SURGEON WOULDN'T SEE ME CRY.

GO GET YOURSELF SOME COFFEE. WE'LL CALL YOU WHEN THE SURGERY'S DONE.

I WAITED WITH OTHER NERVOUS PARENTS. I TRIED IN VAIN TO READ A RATHER IRRITATING ARTICLE IN "THE NEW YORKER."

HOW OLD WAS THAT LITTLE GIRL WHO DIED AFTER A TONSILECTOMY?

FORTUNATELY I DIDN'T HAVE TO WAIT A LONG TIME.

MS. COHEN?
HE DID VERY WELL. WE TOOK OUT SIX TEETH AND PUT IN A SPACER.

HE'S STILL SLEEPING OFF THE ANAESTHETIC.

THEY HAD LEFT IN HIS ORAL AIRWAY, DEFORMING HIS LITTLE FACE. THAT PISSED ME OFF.

OH, THEY TONGUE THAT OUT WHEN THEY START TO WAKE UP.
I removed his airway. He was drooling blood and saliva.

*cough*
*cough*

There were raw red holes where some of his teeth had been.

I watched him wake up.

elevatow...
"ELEVATOR"
MY GOD
HE'S STILL
OBSESSED
WITH THE
ELEVATOR
OUT IN THE
HALLWAY!

WHAT DID HE
SAY?

IT WAS AMAZING, THROUGH
ALL THE PAIN AND SEDATION,
MY SON'S DEVOTION TO THE UGLY
METAL ELEVATOR HAD REMAINED
UNDIMMED.

SWEETIE, DO
YOU WANT TO
SEE THE
ELEVATOR
BEFORE WE
LEAVE?

YES

THE NURSE VERY KINDLY LET MY SON
RIDE IN THE ELEVATOR BEFORE
WHEELING HIM OUT TO THE CAR.

WE SPENT THE REST OF THE
DAY EATING ICE CREAM AND
WATCHING DISNEY JR.

GO TO
HOSPITAL,
GO TO
ELEVATOR.

Yeah,
That
Was
Fun.

END

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