



Disarming Dialogues in Ethics and Professionalism

Laboured Love

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Received: 26-APR-2016

Accepted: 26-APR-2016

Published Online: 05-MAY-2016

It was the month of January and a few of us were posted in the Labour room. It was one hectic month for us, juggling classes, wards and labour room, but it was also a time I enjoyed.

Everyday day we would learn new stuff. For me, Labour room was like a whole different world. The constant groaning, moaning and screaming (at times) of the women in labour, the reluctant attendants to whom we had to explain why exactly we needed the tests, why exactly we needed the blood transfusion right then, why exactly we needed to go for caesarean or why exactly they could not come beyond a point to meet their patient.

Then there were the filling of forms, the collection of blood samples, the catheters, the I.V lines, the meconium stains, and fragile newborns.

One such morning I was filling up a

requisition form when Ma'am asked me to check the vitals of this patient who had just come in. As was required of us, I took the history of the patient and performed the general examination. It was her fifth pregnancy - she had four daughters from before.

She was severely anaemic, and her blood pressure was highly raised. On talking to her, she revealed that she had had complications in her earlier pregnancy and had been advised not to get pregnant again. She was really scared.

“Then why did you get pregnant again?” I asked her.

“Because ‘they’ wanted a boy”, she said, her eyes pointing toward the far corner where her husband and mother-in-law stood waiting.

Both the baby and the mother were in a bad condition and Ma'am called the

Cite this article as: Kashyap A. Laboured love. RHiME. 2016;3:19-21.

husband and explained everything to him, asking for his consent for a caesarean section. He seemed tense. After a while, he asked, "Isn't there any way you could do normally? How much extra money do we need if an operation is to be performed?"

Ma'am said, "You only need to get a set of things - the list will be provided."

He said he needed time to think, to which ma'am said time was of essence here, that every moment the condition of both the baby and the mother was deteriorating. Ma'am then asked me to take the necessary signatures and left to attend to another patient.

So there I was, standing next to them, while the man and his mother decided.

When they were taking too long, I asked them to hurry, at which time the husband turned to me, dropped his voice and asked, "Could you please tell us if it's going to be a boy or a girl? It would be easier then for us to decide."

I was taken aback; however, I asked, quite calmly to my own surprise, "How so?"

"If it is a boy, we can consent for the operation; if it is a girl, what is the point?"

"The point is that she is your wife! And she is dying carrying the child that you gave her!! Because you wanted a boy! Forget about the baby - if you don't give your consent, your wife will die! So will you please decide fast whether or not you want to save your wife?"

At this point he turned to his mother, who rebuked him in their dialect. From what I could catch, she said that he should have listened to her and married the other girl since this girl's womb was

already cursed....and so on.

I couldn't listen to them anymore, so I gave them the papers to sign - if they wanted to within the next 15 mins or so - and went to check on the patient. The woman was slowly going into shock - the nurses had even prepared her for OT (as instructed) in case the attendants decided to go for it.

I went near her while one of my friends measured her blood pressure. She looked up at me and asked in a shaken voice if she was going to die. "I have three daughters", she whispered. My friend quickly replied that she and the baby both were going to be great.

My mind was frantically searching for alternatives. Who could sign instead of the husband? I asked her, "Um, where are your parents? Will they come?" She said she didn't know where they were as she had eloped with the husband a long time back.

She looked at me and asked if she could see her husband once. I said sure, I'd send him over. She gave me a weak smile. I went out and told him to go see her for five minutes.

That was the last I saw of her. I was sent to the postnatal ward for some work, and continued there until the afternoon. When I returned to the labour room, I learnt that the husband had denied surgery; she had gone into active labour, and had collapsed mid-delivery.

The obstetricians tried everything but they couldn't save her. Or the baby. It was a boy. I laughed out loud, although there was nothing funny.

I saw the husband in one corner, signing papers. I don't know why I did what I

did next, but I went upto him and said, “She died because of you.”

He didn’t react, probably because he didn’t expect me to say such a thing.

At that moment, it didn’t matter anymore what he thought or did. Nothing mattered.

That evening I didn’t go for evening tea

with my friends, I took up a pile of paperwork which everyone mostly loathed and sat with it.

I cried quietly. I don’t know if I felt sad or angry. Angry mostly, I decided later. Probably at her fate; probably at the fact that he got to decide her fate; probably at my helplessness. I didn’t know.

I still don’t.

This reflective student narrative has an [associated commentary](#) written by Dr Nalin Mehta.