

MIND TO MIND

Creative writing that explores the abstract side of our profession and our lives

Stephen T. Harvey, M.D., Editor

The Similarities of My Profession and Motherhood

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As an anesthesiologist, I put a lot of effort into keeping my patients safe during surgery. But many people, including other physicians, do not understand what it takes to be an anesthesiologist. Some think we just make patients unconscious for surgery. Our profession is often perceived as one that can be performed while sipping a cup of coffee! But almost 10 years into practice, I have seen and faced many challenges. I have never attempted to explain the nature of these challenges to anyone—not because I felt it unnecessary, but because it is hard to explain.

One year into motherhood, I woke up one morning and saw the peaceful face of my sleeping child. Suddenly, I could relate everything I practice as an anesthesiologist to being a mother! I could see several similarities between the two.

For example, it requires a great deal of planning and preparation to be a good mother and a good anesthesiologist. It was not easy to plan a family during medical school and residency. When I finally did, there were many things to consider. Timely health checkups, thorough preparation for the arrival of the baby, last minute checks so that nothing important would be missed—everything possible was done so that the whole process would be safe for my baby. This is precisely what goes on every day in anesthesia. Careful planning for each patient, preparing the patient and the operating theatre, going through safety checklists—everything is addressed before anesthesia begins so the patient will be safe throughout surgery.

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Similarly, the practices of motherhood and anesthesia are all about sound sleep. Much of my energy at home now goes into helping my baby sleep. I want him to have an undisturbed sleep for better health. The same happens at work. I try to give my patients a sound, trouble-free, relaxed sleep, so that the surgeon and I can work as smoothly as possible.

Milky white liquid is the secret ingredient to both experiences. Needless to say, breast milk or formula is at the heart of any parenting experience. It provides nutrition but is also helpful for various other situations. Whenever my child is sleepy, fussy, or screaming in pain, I simply put him to my breast or give him a bottle and he calms down. In anesthesia, the milky white liquid called propofol is often the best way to put my patients to sleep. In addition, it is the solution to many other problems encountered during anesthesia.

Vigilance is the mantra of motherhood and the practice of anesthesia. I might allow my child to play and explore the surroundings, but I am constantly watching him for any mishap. I never grow complacent, no matter how safe the surroundings may appear. In anesthesia, my senses are always on alert for warning signs—the skipping of heartbeats, the sounds of alarms, the flashing red and orange lights, the twitching of the patient's hands, the gush of blood draining from the surgical field, etc. I am always on guard.

And I am always happy to get a helping hand at work and at home. As a mother, I am grateful for a break so I can grab a bite to eat or take a much-needed nap. Practicing anesthesia can be similarly tiring and demanding. As an anesthesiologist, I am always happy to have helping hands so I can refocus and recharge. I never know when challenges will arise, so I am always ready to improvise. One moment, everything may seem quiet and normal; the next, chaos ensues. Everyone looks to you to take control and resolve the crisis. I am always on my toes, at home and at work, ready to roll up my sleeves and resolve every situation.

And I always carry my battle gear. If you are a parent, you will know the importance of carrying your baby's supplies on every outing: diapers, wipes, bottles, formula, a change of clothes, toys—the list goes on! The same is true in the world of anesthesia. We have carts and toolboxes containing tubes, scopes, syringes, and medicines. A fully stocked armamentarium is always a strength.

Mothers and anesthesiologists make it look cool and easy, but we are constantly on our toes. We are never as relaxed as we might appear. A mother never knows when

the diaper will blow out, when her baby will throw up, when he will trip over his favorite toy, or when he will start crying incessantly. Anesthesiologists are similarly prepared for surprises. Personal reward or recognition is never on my mind as a mother or an anesthesiologist.

Despite all the stress, I find both parenting and anesthesiology very gratifying. As a mother tends to forget her troubles when watching her child grow up to be a wonderful human being, anesthesiologists overcome their stress when seeing patients emerge safely. We do our duty selflessly, with only the person we are serving in mind, never expecting anything in return.