

FIVE DAYS IN THE HOSPITAL FOR WHAT??!???

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Caleb, an 8-month year-old African American, Medicaid-insured, male from Holly Springs, NC arrives to the emergency room at Springs Medical Center in Cary, NC for a foreign body mass on his oral palate

Dr. Jay Mixson stared puzzled at the baby, Caleb, and his Grandmother, Mrs. Betty Berg. He was very concerned that the boy hadn't been eating well, but was worried about how to proceed since the parents were not present in the Emergency Department on this Thursday morning. As he contemplated what to do next, he asked the Grandmother to go back over the baby's behavior that brought her to the hospital.

“Well, doctor, his momma brought him to my house on Tuesday to watch him this week so she could go out of town. I've been watching him and his brothers since they were all born, so I usually know what's normal for them. I started noticing Tuesday morning that he wasn't taking his bottle like normal. By Wednesday, I was really getting concerned and, while he was laying in my arms, I thought I saw something in his mouth. That's when I called his momma and she said it was ok to bring him here.”

Dr. Mixson, was pleased that Caleb wasn't running a fever, but was very concerned about dehydration with such a small child. He explained that he could proceed with preliminary testing (vitals; metabolic panel (complete blood count) bloodwork; and CT Scan). However, he told Ms. Betty that she would need to either have Caleb's mother come to the hospital or send a Guardian Consent form in case additional services were needed.

After running the tests, Dr. Mixson was pleased that all of the test results were normal, including a screening for abuse and neglect. There were no indications of infection, but an IV was started to prevent dehydration since Caleb still didn't want to take a bottle and it had been almost four days since his Ms. Betty said he had eaten well.

Since Caleb still wasn't eating well and his mother wasn't present yet, Dr. Mixson decided to go ahead and admit him to the hospital until they had a better grasp of what was wrong. Dr. Mixson recommended that several specialists be consulted further including pediatric ENT, oral maxillofacial surgery, and pediatric gastroenterology to evaluate the mass.

On Friday, Caleb's mother had arrived and consented for him to be prepped for anesthesia in the hopes of doing both a biopsy and a laryngoscope, scope of the throat. However, after waiting two hours without eating in preparation for the procedure, Dr. Mixson learned that the pediatric anesthesia team was unavailable until Monday. Consequently, Caleb would be kept in the hospital over the weekend on IV fluids to avoid extra costs to the family for a non-urgent procedure, which also resulted in further delays to his ability to take solid foods.

As Monday morning dawned, Caleb's family was told that he wasn't permitted to have any bottles after 4am. He still wasn't eating well and had become increasingly irritable and upset each day of his hospital stay. At 10:30 am Caleb's family hugged him close before he was rolled into the operating room for the scope and biopsy.

Once sedated, the team took pictures of the mass they could see in the upper palate of Caleb's mouth. Prior to biopsy, one of the surgical team members gently probed the mass with a blunt probe. Upon touching the mass, the clear membrane ruptured and liquid poured out of the sac. After suctioning the fluid, the surgical team used the blunt probe again to touch the mass and realized that it was mobile. Upon further manipulation, the team extricated an empty pistachio shell and found completely normal tissue on the child's hard palate.

Caleb was returned to his hospital room and Dr. Mixson told his mother of what they found in the operating room. He shared that the team estimated that the shell had become stuck in the baby's mouth five to 10 days earlier. Each time Caleb nursed, the suction created as he drank from the bottle further adhered the shell to the top of his mouth and the liquid mass that formed around it was a result of his body's inflammatory response to the foreign object.

Caleb's Mom stared at Dr. Mixson incredulously.

“Are you telling me that it took you FIVE WHOLE DAYS to figure out my baby had a shell stuck in his mouth?!?!??? Why did it take five days to figure this out? Are you kidding me?!?!?! Am I going to have to pay for five days in the hospital for a shell? A shell that you just basically scraped off the roof of his mouth?”

Dr. Mixson was shocked by her anger and, as he tried to collect himself to respond, Caleb's Mom began yelling again.

“Who is your supervisor? Who do I talk to? I CANNOT believe it took five days of my baby not eating for you to figure this out. Get me a supervisor before I call the news. Now. Get me someone to talk to NOW!”