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A Little Thank You Can Go a Long Way

Pertusis is a very dangerous and chronic (longstanding) disease that endangers the lives of infants. The disease that is also known as the “whooping cough” due to the characteristic sound that is heard when a child inhales deeply after a coughing spell. Young infants can literally choke to death from this infection and therefore, it is very important that the parents and siblings are immunized against *bordetella pertusis*. Despite the availability of the vaccine, we have seen the rate of pertusis infections rise in the past decade. In the 1970’s prior to the introduction of the vaccine, 175,000 cases were reported per year in the US. That number dropped to 3,000 cases only in the 1980’s. In 2010 however, 27,550 cases were reported in the US. You may have heard about the recent outbreaks in Lakewood, NJ and in the State of Washington.

Approximately 5 years ago, I was received a phone call by Mrs. Cohen, a mother of my patient from the office in Kiryas Yoel. Apparently, her nephew who was 3 weeks old at the time was diagnosed with Pertusis, and had been admitted with respiratory distress at Schneider Children’s Hospital. Her sister in law, Mrs. Levy had a house full of kids and she was clearly overwhelmed. Being in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) added to her stress and Mrs. Cohen asked if I could check on her. Gladly, I accepted the request.

The next day, I arrived at Schneider Children’s Hospital PICU to check on Mrs. Levy and her baby. I had seen Mrs. Levy once in the past at our office when she came for a second opinion, so we both recognized each other. At the moment that she saw my face, her facial expression change from a gloomy to glowing and excited look. On my end however, I had to hold back my tears after seeing her baby connected to an oxygen mask and hearing him choke every minute. After spending a few minutes talking to Mrs. Levy and the helpful nurses that cared for the baby for the past week, it was clear that the baby may not be ready to leave the hospital yet, but his status was clearly improving.

I felt that Mrs. Levy was under tremendous amount of stress. On the one hand she was feeling concern and guilt for her ten kids at home (she could not believe what a good time they were having by their cousins houses – an amazing advantage of the tremendous Chassidic support system that was an eye opener for me), and on the other hand, she did want to return home with a choking infant.

I asked Mrs. Levy which attending was in charge that week to which she replied “Dr. S”. As a resident at the hospital I knew Dr. S. very well. He was sharp, outspoken and one of the toughest attending I ever came across. He was born and raised in



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Israel, and I am not sure if it's my imagination or my memory telling me that he was a tank soldier. His diagnostic skills were second to none, and despite Dr. S's toughness with the resident, he was kind and gentle with the patients. I harbored much respect for his clinical skills and his person dedication. I told Mrs. Levy that I was so happy that Dr. S. was on service, not only is he caring and gentle, but in my opinion I added, he is one of the top 5 doctors in the entire hospital. Mrs. Levy echoed that sentiment when she said that he makes time to speak to her and just yesterday he told her, don't worry Mrs. Levy, I will not let the baby go home until he is 100% (this was despite the pressure of insurance companies to discharge babies home and despite the constant pressure to move stable patients to the regular floor from the PICU). Dr. S. made sure that the baby stays under his watch. He mentioned to the mom jokingly, that all he wanted in return was a piece of Kugel. I was elated to hear all that. It seems that Hashem has sent this baby the right messenger at the PICU. Dr. S. totally understood the social background and the situation at home and fought for the baby to remain under his personal watch. I said my goodbyes to Mrs. Levy and walked over the PICU office to try my luck and meet Dr. S. Fortunately, Dr. S. was at his office on that Friday afternoon and through the slightly open door he was happy to see me. I informed him that I came to visit Mrs. Levy and was happy that he was taking care of her and understanding her situation so well. Yes, he said happily, she seemed very mentally distraught when she first came but is doing much better now. "I told her not to worry, I will not send the baby home until he is 100%", he added. We spoke a few more moments and just before leaving I added: Dr. S., I just came by to thank you for caring. I am sure that you know that you have great reward awaiting you in the next world for saving and helping so many lives. You are doing so many Mitzvot every day."

I knew that Dr. S. was not an observant Jew, but he did have a very traditional background (he once commented to me that he knew all the prayers that we say "by heart" in his childhood). So I was sure that he would feel good about this twist – practicing medicine with a heart is doing a Mitzvah, despite it sounding a little "cheesy". But I was truly shocked see his reaction.

With tears in his eyes, he lowered his voice and said: "David, do you know that this is the first time *ever* that an attending came into this office to *thank me*? I have been here for over twenty years, and day after day, attending come here to complain, argue and totally disregard the work that I do for their patients. Between me and you David, I am one of the top 3 doctors in this Hospital, and no one seems to care!!! I want you to learn this from me; I wake up in the morning asking myself what should I do? How can I continue to work like this? And I tell myself over and



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over – I just have to do the *right* thing, no matter what everybody else says or does and that's it!!!

The lesson I learned that day was so clear. Showing gratitude for a healthcare professional goes such a long way. Whether you say a nice word to a receptionist,

nurse or a doctor, with a few kind words, you may attain a lifelong friend behind that glass window (now please do not go overboard, saying too many nice words at every visit may scare off your doctor and label you "manic"). Physicians are taught today to find ways to complement patients. For example, with almost no exception, I will end a well visit of an infant by looking at the mom and saying "you are doing a great job mommy". And if I notice that an overweight child has shed even one pound, I would beamingly shower him with compliments and admiration to build up his confidence.

It is only right that your healthcare professionals will receive the same. One person that immediately may come to your attention is the school nurse. Does anyone bother to thank them for caring so much? It is truly rare for a person to be able to give so much to so many students and do this day in and day out.

I felt extremely lucky that Friday afternoon. It was obvious to me that I was blessed with an overwhelmingly appreciative patient population. Thank G-d, I received so many warm words and numerous heartfelt notes and poems that made the challenging moments of practicing medicine pale in comparison. But on some rare occasion, when I do feel hurt by a certain occurrence, Dr. S.'s words ring in my ears and they blow those negative thoughts out the window.

I never asked Dr. S. how Mrs. Levy's Kugel tasted, but I am sure that he will enjoy the fruitful delicacies of the hard toil of hands and the deep love in his heart in the years to come.

Thanking all the dedicated healthcare professionals of the Five Towns and Far Rockaway,

Sincerely,

David Elazar Simai, MD