

Robert knocked on the first room and entered, only to be stopped in his tracks by the patient's husband, who had stationed himself in a chair by the doorway.

"Excuse me, who are you?" the husband demanded.

"My name is Robert Montefiore, and I am the third-year resident in Labor and Delivery."

"Sorry, buddy, no residents or students allowed. Only real doctors."

At that moment Pat MacGregor walked in behind Robert, overhearing the last remark. She took over quickly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Charles," she said, "all deliveries in this hospital are to be attended by students or residents."

"No way," he retorted. "Who made up that rule?"

"I did," she answered. "I am the residency director here, and I have a well deserved reputation for coming down pretty hard on physicians who don't include trainees in their cases."

"Sorry, Dr. MacGregor, I know my rights, and I refuse to allow trainees in the room when my wife delivers."

"You are correct. That is your right, Mr. Charles," Dr. MacGregor replied. "And if you insist, I will be happy to accommodate you. There are many adequate community hospitals in the region to which I can transfer your wife. Which one would you like to go to?"

"Wh-wh-what?"

"I'll arrange for a transfer right away. We need to hurry, though, because she's already five centimeters dilated and might wind up delivering in a taxi. The driver wouldn't be a student or resident, though, so it's OK."

Mr. Charles blinked. Twice. "You, uh, you're kidding me, right? You wouldn't transfer my wife now."

"I most certainly am not, and I most certainly will if you continue to insist on interfering with my judgment. I intend to provide the best possible care to your wife."

"But how can you claim that having students practice on my wife is providing the best possible care?"

"Mr. Charles," Dr. MacGregor said hotly, "if you had come to your wife's prenatal visits you could have participated in the discussion we already had on this matter."

"I told you so, Hal," Mrs. Charles groaned into her pillow.

Dr. MacGregor continued. "Your wife told me that you came to deliver at this hospital because you believe it to be the finest in the Chicago area. Do you know why it is such a great hospital?"

"Because patients pay top dollar to get their care here, that's why!" he snapped.

"Wrong. It's because the finest physicians and researchers come here. Do you know why they come here?" She did not wait for him to answer. "Because they all want to be associated with an academic institution of the highest caliber. In fact, it is because of the students and residents who study here that you get the privilege of twenty-four-hour access to our high-risk obstetrics team, our level III nursery and our in-house anesthesia, all staffed by some of the finest doctors in the world. Ironically, therefore, it is you who are indebted to our students more than they are to you for the opportunity of 'practicing' on your wife. Now do you want me to transfer her or not? We're running out of time."

Mr. Charles grumbled, "Oh, all right, let them come, but only to watch, no touching."

"Sorry, no deal. I perform deliveries according to my own judgment. For you to presume to instruct me in the technical aspects of obstetrics is dangerous, and I won't allow you to do so. One thing you should know, Mr. Charles, is that in my profession, it is not necessary, it is sometimes not even desirable, for me to touch the patient or handle an instrument in order to be completely in charge of a case. I have delivered a thousand patients without laying a hand on any of them,"

she exaggerated. "As your wife does not represent a special case, it would be dangerous to make an exception for her."

"Hal," Mrs. Charles moaned from behind her pillow, "for once in your life, would you stop being a dick?"

Mr. Charles acquiesced and stood mutely alongside his wife for the remainder of her labor. In the end, Dr. MacGregor, who normally delivered her private patients by herself while assigning a student the task of handing her instruments or cutting suture, stood back and talked the student through the entire birth without laying a hand on the patient or her baby. Robert watched from the rear of the room. It was a beautiful, perfectly executed delivery.

"I've never seen you so angry," Robert later said as he accompanied Dr. MacGregor toward the locker room.

"Angry? I wasn't angry. I try to never get angry," Dr. MacGregor replied. "Can't afford to. My hands shake when I am mad and I become completely unfit for surgery. Sometimes I play the part, however, to make sure my message gets across."

"Did you mean all that about transferring the patient to another hospital?"

"Of course not. That would be abandonment. But Mr. Charles was antagonizing the entire staff, not realizing that rather than protecting his wife from some unseen peril, he was endangering her by interfering with our routines. I couldn't allow that to happen. Besides," she smiled, "someone had to put that asshole in his place, and it fell to me to do it."

"But wasn't he entitled to decline having trainees participate in his wife's delivery?"

"Not exactly. His wife was the patient, and her wishes, not her husband's, obligate us. And I meant what I said about the importance of systems and routines. Are there excellent hospitals that don't participate in medical education? Of course. But they are set up for that. Our students and residents perform important functions that, were they not involved, would have to be carried out by someone else who is not used to performing those tasks. That could lead to error. So my insistence on participation of trainees has as much to do with patient safety as with our important mission of education."

THE EDUCATION OF DOCTOR MONTEFIORE

“But aren’t you afraid of alienating your patients by not accommodating their wishes?”

They had reached the door to the women’s locker room, which Dr. MacGregor opened. “No, Robert. I believe that if I hold my ground on matters of principle, people will respect me for it, even if they don’t agree with me. Think of yourself as the captain of a ship. The staff is your crew; the patient is your charge. If the boat sinks, it is your responsibility.” She opened the door. “Run a tight ship,” she said, and the door closed behind her.