



*This is a resident case log of a patient encounter in which  
an "Aware Medicine topic" was central.*

### A Little Angel Goes to Heaven

A three year old girl, "Starla," was found unresponsive by her grandmother in the morning at the shelter they were both staying at. She didn't know how long Starla had been unresponsive. The ambulance was called and CPR was conducted for at least 45 minutes by the time she reached the hospital. In the ER, CPR was conducted for at least another 45 minutes with her heart rhythm flipping back and forth from v-tach to sinus. She finally arrived on the pediatric floor, her body pale, lifeless and cold. Starla's limbs were connected to numerous tubes, her throat intubated and hooked to a ventilator. I was on call that day and all through the night, the intensivist, the hospitalist, and I took turns ordering additional drips and conducting CPR to keep her "alive" in some form.

After a series of blood and urine tests came back, it was discovered that Starla had opiates and benzodiazepines in her system though she hadn't been given any. Since this was a case of overdose and possibly child neglect, a detective came to the hospital and asked me and the hospitalist many questions. It was strange to discuss medical facts with a detective and the police, not knowing how much or how little to say. As always, conscience guides us and my answers were as honest, thorough, and as medically accurate as possible.

Throughout the night there were many family members and friends in and out of the room. There were lots of questions, emotions, shouting, and blaming as people were shocked to find a previously healthy child now teetering on the edge between life and death. Starla's mother was in jail, so I called her every few hours to give her updates. Unfortunately, she was only allowed out of jail for 1 hour and she had to choose between visiting her in the hospital while she was still alive or to go to her funeral. She chose to visit her in the hospital, which was an emotional trial for her. It angered and upset me to know that Starla's mother would not be at her daughter's bedside when she died. Even after speaking with the detective and hospitalist, the police would not allow her to extend her time with her daughter in her last few hours. Why wouldn't the law bend for her, and make this exception when her one and only daughter that she raised on her own, was on her deathbed?

It was then that I felt powerless in more than one way. I was powerless to help Starla's mom be with her daughter and at the same time I was powerless to save Starla. She was surely dying and it was only a matter of time. While in the hospital, I was fortunate to have such a caring and attentive team working with me that night. They were there to help me and the family cope with the traumatic situation. From a medical perspective, I was learning how to take care of a very unstable, sick child. From an emotional perspective, I was learning how to manage my own stress, shock and sadness while maintaining composure in front of the family members and staff.

After a long and tumultuous night, Starla coded for the last time at 11am the following morning. It was difficult to see her small body receiving chest compressions and shocked but none of us wanted to call her time of death. Finally, there was nothing else that could be done and she was pronounced. No words could describe the profound sadness that pervaded the room afterwards. This was one of the few times I had to cope with a child dying in the hospital. I experienced and learned a lot, having taken care of Starla since her admission and to her death.