



Laura Aitken

Illiteracy

It's not the machines that are upsetting Ms. A, or at least that's what I think, since the vent and she are syncing well as her Flolan trickles within. Something else is the matter, for Ms. A is furiously mouthing and repeating a phrase. Her lips curl around the ET tube that is rendering her voice erased.

I can't understand her—I truly cannot! The reason I'm here is absurd: "She's refusing Flolan till you come talk to her," does she know I can't understand a word? She discards the pen and paper I offer, preferring for me to read lips. I repeat "I can't! I need you to write!" She acquiesces when I insist.

She slowly writes: *M-E-C-C-A* before resuming her mouthing routine. "Mecca the city?" She looks as confused as me. "Me something?" "Me?" "Mean?"

The rest of my team comes in to help; we question her without success. Only when, hesitantly, someone asks "Machine?" does Ms. A excitedly nod, "Yes!" Machine? The vent? Telemetry leads? I hand her the pen to explain, but my mind-reading colleague does not need a hint "You must mean your CPAP machine?"

She deduces Ms. A wants to leave today, and use CPAP in lieu of our vent. We explain our plan so Ms. A understands; Now it's just me who's upset. Why? Health literacy means understanding one's health, but substitute health with patient... Now I myself have *patient* illiteracy, for which patience is the only treatment.

So I start taking time to read Ms. A's lips, and it works! We're almost like friends. She gives us time to plan her discharge, so this never occurs again. Her CPAP machine, though tried and true, isn't enough to nocturnally breathe. So we drop the C and turn 1 into 2: She'll go home with a BiPAP machine.

I switch off-service but return to the MICU the day her tube comes out. It's comforting to see a great SpO₂ and a voice so refreshingly loud. I've helped her survive. She's made me literate. So when she thanks me, I do the same... for, like her erstwhile CPAP machine, I too have gotten an upgrade.

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