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Monitoring Love on the Pulse Oximeter

by Susan Agrawal

When I think about medical equipment like pulse oximeters, the little machines that measure heart rate and how much oxygen is in the blood, the last thing that comes to mind is an emotion like love. These are machines, after all, and machines are by definition cold and devoid of emotion. The only emotions most people associate with a pulse oximeter are anxiety (is my kid OK?) and sadness (why does my kid have to be on this constantly alarming monitor?).

But it turns out that a pulse oximeter can actually quantify love. I know it sounds crazy, but it is completely true, and I am not the first to notice it.

Let me take you back to the beginning, when I first saw love on the pulse oximeter. My daughter was about two weeks old, in critical and rather unstable condition in the NICU on an oscillating ventilator. I had not been permitted to hold her due to her fragile condition. On the average day, her oxygen saturations, or sats, hung around 95-98% while on the ventilator, which was perfectly acceptable.

When she was 12 days old, I was finally allowed to hold her. She promptly fell asleep and relaxed her entire body. For the first time in her life, her sats hit 100%. I remember this very clearly, because for some reason the pulse oximeter she was hooked up to had a "max" setting of 100% and started alarming.

My love for my daughter, and my daughter's love for me, was 100% on the pulse oximeter.

Had it only been that one occasion, I probably would not have thought much of it. But over the past few years, as my daughter's health has declined and she is on a pulse oximeter most of the time, I have seen it happen again and again.

The most common time it occurs is at night when she is sleeping. If I peek in her door, I can check the monitor, which typically reads 96-98% with heart rates from 100-110 beats per minute at night. But if I walk in her room and give her a kiss or a few pats, I can stand there and watch the monitor change in response to love.

First her sats go up to 99 or 100%. Then her heart rate starts to drop into a more normal range. As I stand there, it will typically drop down as much as 15 points, into the 80s and 90s, as she responds to my kiss or a few pats on her belly.

While she responds to some degree to anyone who cares about her, including her nurses who have been with her for three years, she only demonstrates these dramatic changes in response to me. She certainly knows who her mother is!

My daughter is non-verbal, although she does use a communication device and has on occasion told me she loves me using her device. But it is hard for her to use the device physically, and she can't use it at all when she is not feeling well. During those times, I like to think that her pulse oximeter is speaking for her and telling me she loves me. It may sound ridiculous, but you take what you can get.

As she is using more and more medical technology--at last count, she was hooked up to seven things at night--I have had to find ways to both accept the technology and try to view it positively. This little trick with her pulse oximeter has made the process a little easier for me. Instead of a monitor, it is a little messenger.

Who knew you could scientifically monitor love on a pulse oximeter?!