

Courage in the Face of Risk

A three-year-old with a low platelet count and risk of bleeding was admitted to a children’s hospital. The child was fussing and complaining of a headache. The doctor provided a cursory exam and reassured the mother, Mrs. Tom, that everything was all right. No tests were ordered or performed. Less than an hour later, the child had a seizure and developed a fatal brain herniation, the obvious result of bleeding in the brain.

The quality officer of the children’s hospital, Dr. Ireland, was on call that night and became aware of the tragic events. Dr. Ireland visited the weeping mother and explained that by failing to order a CT scan of the head, the hospital had made an egregious mistake. Though Dr. Ireland was not involved in the child’s care, she owned

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the error and explained to Mrs. Tom what could have been done that might have saved her child.

Dr. Ireland courageously risked the wrath of a parent who had just experienced the inconsolable loss of a child. She risked feeding a lawsuit. She risked making an unpopular decision that could have negatively impacted relationships with her colleagues.

Three months later, the hospital asked the mother if she would help prevent similar occurrences and invited her to make a videotape about what



had happened. Mrs. Tom could have, understandably, been enraged by the invitation and refused. But she didn't. Instead she embraced the opportunity and made an impassioned video about vigilance and speaking up, about working with the hospital and its doctors so that this would never happen to another child. The video was posted on the hospital's website and has been viewed by hundreds of thousands of people.

This was a result of Dr. Ireland's courage. By exercising honesty in the face of personal and institutional risk, she doubled down on principled care—practicing courage in the service of justice and professionalism. Even in the face of terrible loss, Mrs. Tom recognized these virtues and rallied behind them. She used courage to turn her personal tragedy into an opportunity to prevent other tragedies. No lawsuit was filed.¹



1 Rea, P., Stoller, J. and Kolp, A. (2018). *Exception to the Rule: The Surprising Science of Character-Based Culture, Engagement, and Performance*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, p.75