

Katie's Story

TRYING to remember one's wedding anniversary can sometimes be difficult. Katie, our wonderful daughter, ensured that it is a date we will never, ever forget. On June 24, we were looking forward to celebrating. At least we fulfilled our promise to 'do something different'. We spent the night in PICU, watching Katie fighting for her life.



Katie has Down's Syndrome but we had always been proud to announce that, health wise, she had suffered nothing worse than any other nine-year-old girl. That all changed in the summer. Tim Henman was failing again to win Wimbledon when, on that fateful morning, we could not wake Katie.

She had been unwell over the weekend - off her food with a slight temperature and sore throat. The day before she had seen her doctor who confirmed she had a throat infection and prescribed antibiotics. There was nothing to prompt her or anybody else to detect anything worse.

But, when Katie could not be woken, we feared something was not right. An ambulance was called and the first thing they checked was her blood sugar levels. It was at the height of the heat wave and the fact that a reading could not be found was put down to the unusually high temperatures. It was unclear as to whether she had high or low blood sugar levels.

However, when she arrived at the Queen Elizabeth II hospital, in Welwyn Garden City, it soon became clear that Katie was seriously ill. The blood sugar level reading was 88 - higher, we were later told than any other the hospital had ever encountered.

The QEII contacted PICU at St Mary's and immediately the retrieval team was on its way. Katie was fighting for her life; she was suffering from severe diabetic ketoacidosis.

But it was nothing but a blur, something out a TV docu-soap. This type of thing doesn't happen to real people, does it?

Katie was taken to St Mary's, with her mum, Linda, and I went home to attend to our son, Tom. A call from Parviz Habibi early that evening confirmed my inner most fears. Katie had fallen deeply into a diabetic coma. She was given a 50-50 chance of survival.

That night was horrendous, yet made that bit easier by the staff in PICU. From Parviz, to the retrieval team and the nurses, they all kept a professional calm, offered a soothing arm around the shoulders but always with a sense of determination. If Katie had to be anywhere in the world that night, this small but comforting ward next to Paddington Station was the place she should be.

When a couple of days later her nurse, Gwen, put a breathing mask on a lovely teddy that had arrived from a friend earlier in the day, we knew both Katie and the teddy were in safe hands.

She made it through the first night, and the next and the next. We probably got in the way but not once was there a complaint. We were encouraged to talk to Katie, to be there for her. The hospital gave us nearby hotel accommodation, meaning we were never more than minutes away.

But then, she 'spiked'. Her blood pressure and sugar levels escalated alarmingly and we were confronted with another chilling possibility, that she could suffer brain damage.

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Our beautiful, lively, cheeky and funny little girl had so many tubes and lines into her body that she looked like a map of the London Underground. Now we were being told she had an equal chance of surviving normally, dying, or suffering brain damage, through swelling of the brain.

One of the wonderful staff, Karen, even showed concern for me when I mentioned I suffered from high blood pressure. While my little girl was lying in one bed, I was sat on another, having my BP checked.

The next 10 days or so are a blur, though one picture remains clear. The determination of every single man and woman in that unit to save Katie came over all the time she was laying in Bed 7 of PICU. As Parviz admitted, 'we don't like losing any of our patients'.

So when she first gave signs of waking, our joy was matched by those who had looked so caringly after her.

Still she was fighting, though the first attempt to extubate her failed. Eventually she awoke and her first words were typically Katie. 'Why' she asked, pointing to a catheter bag attached to another young patient, 'did that little girl have apple juice?'

Katie was transferred to our local hospital and then allowed home for the first time in nearly a fortnight. The relief was insurmountable. Imagine the anguish, the sadness and, we have to admit, the anger when, the following morning, we had to call for another ambulance. Katie had developed breathing difficulties, was soon back at the QEII and the St Mary's retrieval team were called on again. What had little Katie done to deserve this?

This time, Katie's shirt had been ripped off to get the tubes back in to her petite body. She was fighting for her life again.

Back we went to PICU, but slowly she improved, made a full recovery and is now the bright, vivacious little girl, now 10 years old, that we all love and cherish.

She has coped with diabetes so well, testing herself four times a day and accepting the two daily injections as just part of her life, a life she wouldn't now be enjoying had it not been for the men and women in PICU and, importantly, the remarkable machines that go 'ping'.

Having spent the best part of three weeks at St Mary's, most of it in PICU—using up their supply of tea-bags -- we almost miss the unit. Dropping the odd box of chocolates and sweets on the desk seemed nothing more than a minimal gesture, but the way they were devoured suggested they were grateful for our nominal offering.

Seeing children come and go, most leaving far healthier than when they arrived, opened our eyes. At the time, there was debate on the television about gay clergy. I remember sitting there wondering why so much attention was being devoted to such a topic when the real world, a world about life and death, a world where the future was being cared for so lovingly, was going on just yards away.

Katie's life was saved by the people in PICU and the equipment provided by COSMIC. They will forever be in our debt and need every help possible to continue to perform to such a high level. Thank you to everybody involved in saving Katie.

John, Linda, Tom and Katie Ley