Massimiliano Polastri

Can we walk?

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M. Polastri (✉)
Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation,
University Hospital S.Orsola-Malpighi, Via G. Massarenti 9,
40138 Bologna, Italy
e-mail: gbptap1@gmail.com
Tel.: +39-051-636-3485

Human felicity is produced not as much by great pieces of good fortune that seldom happen, as by little advantages that occur every day

Benjamin Franklin

When I arrive at the intensive care unit (ICU), I take a first look: in a cubicle, a 20-year-old woman is awaiting physiotherapy treatment. She had undergone a heart transplant and I remember the moment I saw her sedated and intubated 2 days earlier. Sometimes, we can foresee the evolution of a patient's clinical condition; however, this young woman was a little different, since her ICU postoperative course seemed to be uncertain, presaging a complex recovery.

She is now awake and looking around her bed and appears to be waiting. I go into the cubicle to begin the evaluation necessary to plan the rehabilitation activities she will need. Respiratory, motor, and postural issues are due to be checked, as she had been bedridden for some time before her transplant. Those employed in intensive care settings are aware of the general difficulties with postoperative rehabilitation, including a patient's mood changes and emotional disruption, which are often related

to the ICU stay. Many factors can contribute to delaying the recovery of motor function in ICU patients, such as pain intensity, neurological issues related to surgery (e.g., peripheral neuropathies and central nervous system damage), sedation, the onset of infections, alterations in the circadian rhythm related to the ICU environment, and last, but not least, the space availability. Walking can be a problem under these circumstances. A degree of progression is always desirable during postoperative recovery in ICU patients eligible for on-floor transfer and today there is an adventurous flash from her eyes. The bedside nurse is very helpful and the environment is particularly quiet this Monday morning as normal activity goes on in the ICU.

After exercising, the girl sits on the edge of the bed. I explain that she can try to stand up if she wants since there are no clinical reasons to delay this moment. She looks at me shyly and, with certainty, she agrees. I help her put on her socks and soft shoes, although she does not like the fold of the socks and asks me to fix them. As I am doing this, she is looking at me with approval and a knowing glance that she is ready to begin. Her expression communicates happiness, fear, uncertainty, and determination. Now that she is dressed and the nurse is ready to help us, the girl gets out of bed. As we support her, she looks at us with a smile, widens her eyes, and smiles again. She looks forward and makes a first step, and another and another. Not too far in front of her is a round mirror with a white plastic frame. She sees her image in the mirror for the first time after several days and laughs. The nurse and I encourage these first steps and we support her during a short walk. After a few meters, we turn back towards the bed and help her sit back down.

Days later, the girl sees me through the cubicle's glass, passing into the ICU. She jumps up from the bed, ready to stand up and go out. As I walk toward the sliding door, I look at her smiling and calling to me from beyond the glass, "I'm ready, can we walk?"

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