

## Can You Count to Ten?

By Alan Chien

My first patient in the pediatric unit was a ten-year-old boy named Adam. The outside of his room was painted blue, with playful fish covering the pillars and frosted waves on the window glass acting as curtains to give patients a little more privacy. My notes from the night shift doctor read “admitted for asthma exacerbation” and I was unsure what to expect on the other side of his door. I stood by the door for a good minute repeating Adam’s name over and over and re-reading his notes.

When I entered his room, Adam was still; inclined and connected by a long, narrow tube inflating his partially collapsed lungs to two liters of oxygen per minute. His gray Puma T-shirt and dark athletic shorts featuring a small chocolate pudding stain helped distinguish him from the beige walls decorated with shiny silver medical instruments.

I introduced myself as a third-year medical student responsible for collecting a brief history of his illness and performing a physical exam. Although he was divided between responding to me and watching television, he did his best to answer my questions. While listening intently to his heart and lungs, I reassured Adam and his mother by emphasizing each of his improvements since his admission the night before. Despite this good news, my speech failed to make him smile.

I remembered the eccentric mix of toys I had stuck in my pocket before leaving home that morning. Determined to make Adam smile, I asked, “As a reward for being a wonderful patient, can I show you a magic trick?” For the first time, he perked up and leaned forward in his bed.

Holding an alcohol-sanitizing napkin, I proceeded to ask Adam where the phrase “squeaky clean” had originated. With just a squeeze, I began to produce sharp “eee-oo” sounds from the closed package. I handed him the sanitary wipes, and then he began to squeeze the container, and as if by magic, he reproduced the same sounds. I used to perform a similar trick at Hollywood nightclubs with the expensive leather shoes and bags of patrons; the secret was a small squeaker for dog toys that I had concealed between my fingertips. While I was unsure if the interaction had made any difference to Adam, as I reached for the door he volunteered “Can I see a new magic trick tomorrow?” His voice dropped as he added, “If I am still here.”

His prior questions were more difficult to explain. *What is a subcostal retraction? What color is a rhinovirus? Why can't my little sister visit me?* Now his excitement to see a magic trick was in stark contrast to his despair at being contained within the monotonous beige columns of his room. I knew there was only one answer I could give: *why not?*

The next day, I returned to his room with my attending, two residents, and another third-year medical student. Again I examined the patient from head to toe. He leaned in to allow me to listen to his heart and lungs, which sounded healthier than the day before. The attending asked whether he or his mother had any concerns—they both answered no. As we were halfway out the door, Adam piped up. “Magic trick?” The attending, residents, and family all turned to me with curiosity.

I had prepared a special illusion to highlight Adam’s improved breathing. One classic clinical examination to determine the severity of a patient’s asthma is to observe their ability to count from one to ten in one breath. I disguised this exam within a magic routine by tearing a paper towel in half and placing one half in my right hand and one in my left. As Adam completed his count of ten, the piece in my left hand vanished and appeared with its other half in my right hand.

The room went silent after the routine. I was scared about whether I had broken some unwritten rule of medicine by performing a magic trick; an activity that had previously brought countless smiles to me and to those around me outside of the hospital context. My inner worry was interrupted by Adam’s amazement. The medical team let out a gasp and a small shriek of joy. Each person asked Adam how he thought I had made the trick happen though no one in the room could answer the question they posed. I found myself surprised by the power of a fifteen-second performance to find joy in the most unexpected places and help me connect with patients while performing exams.

On the way to work the following day, I glanced at my passenger seat overflowing with my stethoscope and a hodgepodge of stickers and trinkets, including a finger puppet that I would have enjoyed as a child. I walked into Adam’s blue room to tell him that I had a new magic trick only to find that he had already been discharged and sent home.

A new child had taken Adam’s place: a “four-year-old female with fatigue.” I walked in and introduced myself, excited to see whether my finger puppet could help distract her during the heart and lung exam, or if she too would gasp in delight after counting to ten.

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