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Special Connections

Nurse Shayle Savoie



Special Connection

Nurse's ostomy surgery creates a shared experience with patients

By Rolf Benirschke

Shayle Savoie has always had a deep desire to care for others and a lifelong dream to work in the health-care industry. In 2020, while working as a registered nurse on the night shift in a step-down unit she developed some constipation and rectal bleeding. Following a colonoscopy, she was diagnosed with mild proctitis which quickly resolved within a month with medication. Following a repeat colonoscopy, she was told the images of her colon looked "beautiful" and that her proctitis had resolved. Shayle attributed the symptoms to the stress of working the night shift and the interruptions in her sleep cycle. She never thought that one day she would become the patient instead of the nurse.

From Nurse to Patient

It was easy to forget about that episode until, in August of 2022 she suddenly started feeling ill after a day at the beach with her friends. Convinced her diarrhea was the result of food poisoning, she checked with her friends before visiting the urgent care and was shocked when she was told that her inflammatory markers were "skyrocketing." Since she was already scheduled for a routine colonoscopy the following month, the physician recommended waiting to see those results. To add a complicating factor to her situation, a few days later Shayle found out that she was pregnant for the first time, thrilling both her and her husband who were newlyweds and ready to embark on the new journey of parenthood together! Considering this, her GI doc suspected that perhaps the inflammatory response he had seen was due to her pregnancy hormones so suggested Shayle "just keep an eye on it."

Unfortunately, Shayle's condition continued to deteriorate, and each day was worse than the day before. She missed important family celebrations and began

calling in sick for work. Still thinking this was all related to her pregnancy, Shayle continued to battle it out, often vomiting and having diarrhea at the same time. After being referred to a physician who specialized in treating IBD patients, she was prescribed a low dose of oral prednisone which Shayle said, "Made me feel better for about an hour and then I was back to being absolutely miserable."

Pregnant and Scared

When she suddenly started experiencing sharp pains in her abdomen, Shayle's obstetrician recommended she head to the ER. At this point, Shayle had kept her pregnancy a secret from her family hoping to surprise them with a "big reveal" when the time was right, but the urgency of the situation necessitated Shayle reluctantly telling her mom. "It wasn't a joyful moment because I was feeling so horrible and so scared about the future," Shayle explained. Shayle went to the hospital for the first time on September 2nd where she had an MRI and was diagnosed with severe pancolitis (inflammation of the colon) and had an ultrasound which placed her baby at six weeks gestation. She was sent home to follow up with her gastroenterologist regarding her new diagnosis.

After about ten days at home trying to survive on Tylenol, crackers, and Gatorade things were not improving. She had difficulty sleeping through the night due to unbearable pain, so she returned to the hospital on September 10th and insisted upon being admitted. The experience brought back memories of all the patients she had treated as a nurse. She suddenly realized she had been unaware of how important it was for patients to advocate for themselves.

Suffering the Unthinkable

While at the hospital she went through more tests including a sigmoidoscopy and was horrified when she received the results. "Whereas my previous colon images were 'beautiful,' this time my colon was completely black

"The experience brought back memories of all the patients she had treated as a nurse. She suddenly realized she had been unaware of how important it was for patients to advocate for themselves."



Left: Nurse Shayle Savoie intubated and restrained with a wound vac, three drains, catheters and a central line after emergency ileostomy surgery. Her colon perforated in at least ten places. Above: Going home with her husband, Nick, after 28 days in the hospital.

and looked necrotic. I couldn't believe I was looking at the same body part." The doctors were stunned at how quickly her colon had changed, but were confident that biologics would be the answer. So, Shayle received IV infusions but her condition continued to worsen and her inflammatory markers continued to rise. Sadly, after two weeks in the hospital, on September 20th Shayle suffered the unthinkable — a miscarriage.

Shayle was devastated and heartbroken. She felt hopeless and remembers, "I was so sick I really didn't care about what happened to me. The entire time I was in the hospital I didn't watch one movie, read one book, or do one puzzle. I didn't have any desire to do anything enjoyable for myself. I was simply trying to survive."

Concerning Scan Results

After the miscarriage Shayle was able to finally get a CT scan to evaluate the state of her disease. Shayle was scheduled for a dilation and curettage procedure the next morning to remove tissue in the uterus and prevent infection or heavy bleeding. But a late-night phone call informed her that the results of the CT scan were so concerning that a colorectal surgeon would be in her

room at 5:00 am to discuss surgery.

Shayle was stunned and simply did not know how to process all of this. "I had just suffered a heart-wrenching miscarriage a few hours before and now I had received shocking news over the phone saying that I needed emergency surgery. How much devastation can a twenty-seven-year-old experience in one 24-hour period?" While you might expect Shayle to be shocked or angry, she remembers feeling nothing, "At this point I didn't really care what was happening to me. I was so miserable and suffering so badly."

The surgeon informed Shayle and her family that the imaging showed a toxic mega colon that needed to come out right away for fear of perforation. Shayle's surgery was scheduled for the following day and she had but one question for her surgeon, "Am I going to have to have a bag?" His response was definitive, "Yes, but it might not have to be forever. We just need to get you through this."

On September 22nd, Shayle had ileostomy surgery. When she woke up after the surgery, it didn't take her long to realize something had not gone as planned as she was intubated and her wrists were restrained. She had an open wound with a wound vac, three drains, a rectal tube, foley catheter, central line in her neck and several IVs. She began to panic and gestured for a white board so she could write a message to her family with just six words, "Get this tube out of my throat!"

The surgeon explained that Shayle's colon had



Left: Shayle was the 2023 Mission Speaker for the Champions of Hope Gala for the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation (CCFA). Above: Shayle and her husband Nick volunteering at Camp Oasis with CCFA.

perforated in at least ten different places and when he had tried to remove the damaged parts, pieces of the colon just kept tearing away. They had done everything they could to manage the leakage of fluid and to prevent infection, but were very concerned that Shayle would become septic. The surgeon told Shayle's family, "The one thing she has on her side is that she is young and the next 24-hours are going to be critical."

Ileostomy and the ICU

The next 24 hours in the intensive care unit were critical, as they fought the sepsis infection with antifungals, steroids, antibiotics, blood thinners and administered Dilaudid to manage her pain. Shayle cringes remembering that pain, "I thought the pain was bad before my surgery, but this...this was absolutely excruciating, and I wondered if I was ever going to live another day of my life without pain." Shayle's ostomy was the least of her worries at this time, "I'd honestly not even thought about the ostomy at this point, there was just so much going on." Shayle's condition worsened after surgery due to the vicious infection. She was in critical condition needing TPN, blood transfusions and multiple specialists were reviewing her case to understand why

she wasn't improving.

After getting out of the ICU and being moved to the surgical floor, Shayle met Mandy, a WOC nurse who she describes as "heaven sent and the most perfect human to have that job." Mandy quickly took Shayle and her family under her wing. "It was Mandy who managed my ostomy and taught my mom and my husband so they could help me when I got home." Shayle clearly remembers how she felt about her ostomy, "It was simply a part of me and caring for it was going to be just like brushing my teeth or styling my hair — just another task"

Finally Home

After 30 days in the hospital, where she lost 30 pounds, Shayle was finally able to return home with her wound vac, one drain and her ostomy despite still experiencing significant pain. She had home health come three days a week for the next month and a half as her physical wounds began to heal. Determined to get her life back, she started taking small steps toward independence and was even courageous enough to fly to Indiana for Thanksgiving while managing her wound vac and caring for her new ostomy.

Her healing journey was long and arduous. She asked her doctor, "When am I going to feel better again?" He confidently told her to expect improvement by four months. Shayle was incredulous and remembers, "I thought he was crazy because I didn't think I would ever feel OK again. I simply did not believe him." But Shayle slowly regained her strength and began researching everything she could about ostomies.

While it wasn't easy for her physically, Shayle finally returned to work three months after her surgery and immediately recognized how her recent experiences as a patient were going to influence her future work as a nurse. She took time to seek out the ostomy patients in the hospital where she worked and says her shared experience forged very special connections. "It was important for my own healing to get back to work and make a difference in the lives of these patients while letting them know that they were going to be OK and would still be able to do the things they love."

Rekindled Dream

It has been a year since Shayle's surgery and with the support of her family and the clearance from her physicians, she and her husband are hoping to rekindle their dream of becoming parents once again. Shayle gently shakes her head while saying, "If you would have told me this is where I would be in my life a year later..."

"You do not get to choose what defines you. No matter what your story is, you are a fighter. You are so brave for getting up each day and choosing to live your life. Never be ashamed of your scars."

happy, feeling more loved than ever, thriving in my career and living my best life, I would have never believed you! I had hit absolute rock

bottom, and I am here to tell you, it does get better! The rest of my journey is yet to unfold, but I know if I can get through the past year of my life, I can get through anything."

Shayle's message to fellow ostomates: "You do not get to choose what defines you. No matter what your story is, you are a fighter. You are so brave for getting up each day and choosing to live your life. Never be ashamed of your scars. I will never be ashamed or embarrassed of something that gave me my life back! When tragedy happens, in order to heal, you need to feel the pain, emotionally and physically, and be able to grieve what once was. The only way to get over the pain is to walk through it. Grief and gratitude can coexist, we can grieve the "easy and healthy" lives we did not get to live, but we can learn to love and be grateful for the path we are now on." 🌈

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