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Just in the Nick of Time

By Brendan Chiu, MD, BSc (Med.)

One Sunday morning in the early 1970s, I was on duty in the emergency department at the local hospital. I remember the nursing staff handing me a set of facial X-rays for a patient who had already been seen by another physician just after midnight. In those days, though, there wasn't an X-ray technician on duty after midnight, so to have his facial bones checked the patient had to return in the morning. At the time, I was just out of medical school and fresh in my mind was advice from one of my professors — never diagnose a patient on the strength of test results alone. Heeding his advice, I went to see the patient for myself.

The patient told me that on the previous night he had been assaulted by three men. He had not been knocked unconscious during the attack, but had received a bad beating, especially on the face. He also recounted receiving several punches to the chest. His face and lips were quite swollen, and at the time he had no complaints of chest pains. After examining his face, I followed up with the usual chest examination — and I'm glad I did. I found a grade 5/6 pansystolic murmur over his left chest. After quickly questioning him for any history of cardiac murmur (to which he denied having any), I did an electrocardiogram (ECG) which showed the classic pattern of a septal infarct. Consulting the on-call internist, I concluded that he had suffered a rupture of the interventricular wall from a heavy blow to the chest and developed a ventricular septal defect (VSD) as a result. Almost immediately, his condition started to deteriorate. We transferred him to the Toronto General Hospital, and after receiving open heart surgical repair of the VSD, he made a good recovery.

It was a very lucky day for both him and I. In fact, if the hospital had maintained an X-ray technician for the night shift, it is likely the patient would have had a negative facial bone X-ray and gone home since his heart murmur was probably not audible during the initial period of his injuries when he first presented. This has to be my most “unforgettable moment.” 

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