

# Memories of a Former Patient

*By Danielle Reicher, M.D.*

I had a mask induction when I was 4 years old. That personal experience is why I was somewhat surprised at the confident reply by one of my anesthesiologist colleagues to a surgeon's inquiry as to whether a 4-year-old surgical patient would remember a mask induction. My associate seemed fairly convinced that ultimately there would be little or no memory of the event. I smiled to myself as I heard this answer, and it got me thinking about my hospitalization many years ago as a child in 1960.

As was commonplace in those days, I had been admitted to the hospital the night before a diagnostic cystoscopy. I did not enjoy my welcome to the hospital, which began with blood tests. Before my blood was taken, I asked from where they would take the sample because, on a previous traumatic occasion, blood had been drawn from my earlobe. No answer was given to me, but in anticipation that my question meant that I would resist efforts to obtain my blood, a team was summoned to hold me down. They did this with such brute force that I barely felt the needle enter my antecubital vein, which, by the way, I did not fear at all.

I do not recall having received a premedication injection. A feeling of fear and panic overwhelmed me that morning as I was wheeled to the operating area. The next and most vivid memory was my receiving a mask induction for anesthesia, the smothering feeling of a mask held tightly on my face and breathing an unpleasant inhaled anesthetic. I believe that I kicked my anesthesiologist in the face! Then I remember waking up and feeling dizzy, strange and confused.

Later that day, I began to feel so much better. I was able to eat and walk around the ward. The sights that I saw while ambulating about—such as the tiny babies in the nursery—left further permanent memories. Down the hall from me, looking like a fragile porcelain doll, was a 12-year-old whisper of a girl who, I learned, had congenital heart disease and a primitive external pacemaker. She looked so weak, pale and alone. I am certain that these early experiences ultimately played an influence in my choosing to enter the medical profession and, perhaps, even to choose anesthesiology. Indeed, the powerlessness that I felt changed me forever.

All these years later, I am still not a fan of the mask induction yet I know children fear needles as well. Hopefully, anesthetic experiences nowadays are less traumatic with the use of oral premedications to allay anxiety, provide some element of amnesia, and facilitate a smooth inhalation induction (or even the insertion of an intravenous access). Although that mask induction may, in part, have led me to medicine as a career, one thing is certain: The experience was unforgettable.