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### Spinal tap

My fifth grade school year had just begun when I started getting dreadful headaches. I was taking Advil by the handful, but my headaches never really seemed to go away. Thinking it was stress, I navigated through my school year constantly trying to avoid and ignore my aching head. As the years passed, I began to think this pain was never going to subside. Sixth and seventh grade passed quickly, and suddenly the headaches came more often with a fierceness directed behind my eyes. Slowly I began noticing that certain things I ate seemed to trigger my debilitating headache. I knew, being in constant pain, that something was wrong. My family and I had decided to push forward and get to the bottom of what was really going on inside my body.

Missing more and more days of school, I thought maybe my headaches could possibly be a simple eyesight problem. Within a week, I got an appointment to have my eyes checked by my local ophthalmologist. My mother and father were unable to attend my appointment. As it was a simple eye exam, my adorable little grandmother was available to come. After arriving at my appointment and having my eyes dilated I went through a battery of testing to see if I was near or far sighted. The doctor entered the room with a strange look on his face. He informed me that my eyesight was excellent and that I would fortunately not need glasses. I was relieved but still left with a sense of confusion. I took a deep breath, feeling frustrated that I still had no answers to my

headache ordeal. However, the ophthalmologist proceeded forward, reaching for his equipment to perform yet another eye test. After looking into my eyes a number of times he told my grandmother and I that there was an excess of fluid behind my eyes. The fluid was causing pressure on my eyes. This could be a phenomenon called a pseudo tumor. My brain and eyes respond like there is a tumor in my head, when in reality there is not, or there could be an actual tumor in my head. This was terrifying news. The local doctor set me up with an appointment for the following day. I was to see a long list of specialists at Harford Children's Hospital. My grandmother and I returned home to explain what the doctor expressed to my parents.

The next day my mom, our family friend, Amy, and I set out to meet the specialist now involved with my medical case. The Ophthalmologist would be taking pictures of the inside of my eyeballs to measure the amount of pressure being placed on my optic nerve. After my appointment with the specialist, I was sent across the street into the main hospital building. Heading up the elevator, I could sense my mom was getting nervous. I would now meet the neurologist for a battery of tests, which included standing on one foot, closing my eyes while in a standing position and tipping my head back as far as possible, hopping on one leg, moving my eyes all around, touching my nose etc. all for a grumpy old man with a terrible bedside manor. This was quickly going from bad to worse. He instructed us in a cold and very unpleasing way that we would be heading down to the emergency department for a spinal tap.

From that moment on the words "spinal tap" played over and over again in my jumbled thirteen-year-old head. I had heard of the procedure, and from what I had understood, it was a terrible thing to go through. I can remember my grandfather telling

me the story of how he once had to receive a spinal tap. I distinctly remember his facial expressions while telling the story to all of us grandchildren. I knew it was something I never wanted to experience. But here I was on the dreaded elevator ride down stairs into the ER. Even though I was young, I think anyone would feel sick to their stomach heading for a spinal tap. My mom, Amy and I reached the doors of the emergency department doors wishing we could all turn around and just go home.

Hearing a screaming baby the minute I entered the emergency room increased my feelings of terror. This spinal tap was beginning to grow legs and teeth. Just when I thought I would jump up and make a run for it, a young beautiful nurse walked up beside me her mere presence comforted me. She walked me down the long hallway to my room. I entered the room and slipped into a stylin' jonnie. The women came into my room with her "computer on wheels" and asked me a number of very familiar questions. It felt as though my mom and I had already answer these questions fifty times that day. After the questioning, she performed yet another body assessment. As I tried to hold in my laughter, I performed all of the silly tests that were asked of me. When she was finished, the wonderful nurse quickly put an IV into my arm. For some children, this would have terrified them, but for me, I didn't think too much of it. I had always enjoyed watching medical shows on TV and had always been very fascinated with needles and many other medicals procedures. The IV was in, in a matter of seconds. By the time my IV was in place, I had already forgotten about what I was really there for. Just then my nurse returned and looking at my mom said, "Are you aware that a spinal tap is going to take place today?" Trying to avoid her emotion, my very non-medical mother nodded her

head. The nurse, sensing my exasperation, informed me that they would make me feel as comfortable as possible.

A female doctor entered the room first, followed by a short fat doctor. The man informed us that this was a student doctor who would be performing the spinal tap this afternoon. The short fat doctor informed my mom that if she had no qualms with that, they would continue to set up for the spinal tap. Going into something this big and scary and with the risks involved, I knew my mom would say, "No." But to my surprise, again she nervously nodded her head in the corner of the room. I lay back on the uncomfortable stretcher, took a deep breath and placed all my trust in the hands of my mom and the doctors.

Everything was set up in my room and the "big" moment was about to take place. A very large busted nurse walked into the room. This nurse informed me of the position they would like me in for the spinal tap. "Roll over on your side and hold onto your knees as if you were in a fetal position." I did as I was told, and with the back of my head tucked into the woman's chest, all I could see was my belly button. I looked up quickly before the procedure began and could see my mom in the corner of the room hiding her face. Amy, our very close family friend, was sitting beside me rubbing my arm. Quickly I was back to reality with the student doctor behind me ready to begin. "There will be a few small pinches in the center of your back," the student doctor informed me. Seconds after I felt five very distinct pinches around my spine. I remembered thinking in my head, "You've got to be kidding me. Is that really what I have been worried about this whole time? The IV needle hurt more than that." Just then I could hear the student doctor speak again, "Okay Hailey we are going to begin." I waited a few seconds and braced myself

for the pain I was about to feel. Shortly after I could feel pressure beginning to build around my spine, an uneasy feeling, but nothing like I had expected. The legs and teeth slowly began to fall off the spinal tap monster I had created in my mind's eye. Then the pressure was gone quickly and back again. I suddenly realized that the student doctor could not get the needle into the right position and was poking the needle in and out of my back. Feeling the pressure change in my back and the force of the student doctor pushing the needle in, my stomach began to feel anxious. While the back of my head was resting softly against the nurse's large chest, my eyes were focused on my belly button going up and down as the student doctor pushed the large needle in and out of my back. After about the fifth try of the student doctor, the doctor overseeing the situation asked to step in. The minute he took control the needle was in the correct position in my spinal cord and the fluid was draining into a sterile cylinder.

The procedure from start to finish was about a matter of ten minutes. The side table that the doctors had used was cleaned up and everyone was out of my room soon after. The very charming nurse I had seen before the spinal tap came back into the room and gave me a shot of morphine through my IV. Although I wasn't in excruciating amounts of pain, I was exhausted from the stress of it all and still had an hour car ride ahead of me. Before leaving the hospital, the doctors told me that my headache could worsen over the next few weeks before I would start to feel better. Unfortunately, he was right. The next week I felt very tired, nauseous and could not stand up for long periods of time. After about seven days, my headache was gone for the first time in four years. Just like the neurologist had thought, by relieving the pressure from the spinal cord and around my brain, and thus the pressure behind my eyes, all the headaches disappeared.

Weeks after my spinal tap, there was a follow-up appointment with the neurologist at Hartford Children's Hospital. The neurologist informed my mom and me that what he thought I had was a pseudo tumor. This sometimes happens in young girls who are going through puberty. A pseudo tumor is when your body acts like you have a brain tumor but in all reality, there is nothing there. You will get signs and symptoms of your body reacting just like I had had for all those years. If untreated, the pressure causing my headaches could have become so severe that I could have lost or compromised my eyesight. This was a very big chapter in my life that I was very happy to close.

Luckily for me, I received amazing care at Hartford Children's Hospital. I could not have asked for a better group of doctors and nurses, and of course an even better family. Without the support of my family, I would not have been able to get to the bottom of my pseudo tumor. And for that I am forever grateful.