

Hey Kids—It's IG Day



Photographed by Tom Henderson

Designed by Allan Bean

Written by Kit-Bacon Gressitt

Every three weeks, Dayna Fladhammer puts her children in the van and races the dawn from Las Vegas to Mattel Children's Hospital at UCLA. It's a four-hour journey that brings the three of them to a place that, though fleetingly scary, feels mostly safe; a place that provided Dayna the support she desperately craved in the days when Charlie and Katie were newly diagnosed with primary immune deficiency disease.

"Back then, I might have gone over the edge if it weren't for this place and these people," Dayna chuckles.

Every three weeks, Jenelle Scott loads up a rhythm section of thumping medical equipment, rolls her son Noah into the same clinic, and turns the treatment room floor into a playground of colors for Noah's fading eyes.

"He's an old soul," Jenelle says of her 8-year-old, immunodeficient son who will sweetly, slowly succumb to Hurler's syndrome, an enzyme deficiency. "We just enjoy each day with him," she says stolidly.

Every three weeks, nurse Jennifer Richlin greets the lot of them—with hugs and kisses, a ubiquitous supply of forms, and the compassion to engender the trust of kids she'll soon be sticking.



Then they all settle in for a day of immune globulin infusions, embraced with love and laughter, brief tears and not-too-bad tantrums, and the powerful magic of kindred souls. They are in this together, and together they make it work.



But first they wait,
and play, and gnosh ...



... and wait a little more for the dreaded moment
that no manner of distractions can dispel.
The moment of reckoning between parent, child, nurse and needle.



Some days are easier than others; some are more painful for the parent than the child. Regardless, the needle stick is part of the infusion, and neither child nor adult wants it.



"Charlie was freaking out one day," Dayna remembers, "and then I was freaking out. Thank God for Jenelle! She reminded me that he's a kid; it's normal for him to freak out when he's getting a needle."



And when the needles and taping and checking and hugging are all done, the moment passes into pursuit of other distractions, while immune globulin slowly pumps into their young veins.

Immunologist Robert L. Roberts concedes to a draw on the “you go first” contest, one of many in a pediatrician’s tool kit for finessing a reluctant child’s participation in an exam.





The favorite nurse checks on her patients—again and again.



Skittles become the perfect reward—
“Yes, on treatment days, even at 8 in the morning.
Hey, at least they’re fruit flavored!”

The portable DVD player delivers songs of comfort, well remembered.



But as the day slowly
flows on, even being
the center of attention
becomes a bore.





Then it's more hanging out while the precious proteins continue pumping into their precious bodies—to help keep them strong and resistant to infection like the superheroes in their movies...





...until it is done, the very last drop of miracle liquid hits its mark,
and the children visit the toy closet to pick their
"take-home" rewards for being brave.



And Dayna, Jenelle and Jennifer share the brief luxury of just enjoying each other—the intimacy of chronic disease. “When you need a lot of support,” Dayna explains, “you give a lot of support.”



Then, at long last, the patients get to go home, antsy and raucous, ready to play and tease, in control of their own destiny—powerful enough to push all the buttons in the elevator!—because, though they are patients today, they are most importantly children.

And so the cycle goes. ■