

“Where were you when she needed you?” Susan’s voice trembles as she describes the conflict she felt when the mother came on to the ward, and asked to hold her baby. She holds her notes in her hand, reading verbatim – there was no way she would have been able to have done this from memory, despite the fact that the case would remain in her mind for ever.

We look out at the audience as Susan, the last of our four panellists, draws to a close. All eyes are on her, as they have been on the other three, all retelling the story of one poor child, and their growing realisation of what had happened to her.

Josie was only six weeks old when Robert first met her. He tells us that, as the paediatric registrar on call that day, his prime concern was keeping this fitting girl alive in the resuscitation room. You can hear a pin drop when he mentions the marks on her arm; just small bruises, but clearly not made by falling – she was only a tiny baby after all. Robert seems quite matter-of-fact as he relates how he started noticing other marks on Josie’s tiny body; her face, her ear, but his voice has a gravelly sound, as if he’s holding back the emotions. It’s clear by now to the entire audience that what we are about to hear, that the story that is unfolding, is a horrific story about a child, not even 2 months old, abused and neglected.

Robert continues to tell us all about how his mind is whirling, trying to manage a fitting baby, while simultaneously trying to come to terms with what he suspected had happened.

Margaret is our Children’s Safeguarding Nurse Advisor. She takes up the story after Josie has had a CT scan, showing multiple skull and facial fractures, and a bleed on the brain. She’s dealt with numerous cases of suspected and actual child abuse, but it doesn’t change that heart-sink feeling which Margaret so eloquently shares today. How can you describe what it feels like to be making a decision so life-changing, so profound as to affect a family’s very existence? Margaret does just that, and the audience is carried along with her, feeling the weight of responsibility, as she did at the time.

The police were called, and Margaret talks about the briefing with the uniformed officers, as they discuss how they are going to arrest the parents. As she describes the point at which a young police officer, rather exuberant, suggests he might have to Taser the young couple, there is a welcome, and oh-so-necessary moment of light humour. Margaret shows her own human side: as the police are taking the parents away, she is fussing over them. “Have you got your handbag?” “Do you need any more tea?” It’s her way of coping with what will always be a terrible situation, however many times you do it.

Carole is our third panellist. Her gentle Irish lilt lifts the audience, as she describes how, as the Chaplain for the Trust, she was called to offer comfort to the family, and to baptise little Josey. Carole isn't the tallest of chaplains, and her description of how she needed to find a box to stand on in order to bless the baby had the audience laughing. It isn't real laughter, though. It feels forced and unnatural. And why not? After such a stressful and emotional tale, most were holding back tears; many weren't holding them back. And we weren't even done.

How do you comfort a family, when you are aware that they may have been the ones to inflict such suffering on one so young? Carole did, and she tells us about the conflict that raged inside her that day as she did so. Without preaching, without making anyone in the audience feel awkward in any way, she talks about how she leant heavily on her religion and her faith that day.

Susan is last. We look across at her, so young herself, so scared of having to speak in front of such a large audience – there are over 115 pairs of eyes on her. She's got her script, she can hide behind the paper if she needs to. Her voice is so quiet, as she describes how, as the Play Specialist, she first met Josie on the ward. We look out at the audience. Everyone is leaning forward, hanging on every word. In a way, having the paper, having the script, makes it all so much more powerful, somehow. She tells us all about her disbelief and shock when she first heard about Josie and what had happened to her, in Handover. Josie had been in Intensive Care for several weeks, and had just returned to the ward. She was blind and severely brain damaged. But she still needed all the input that Susan and her colleague could give her. Those in the audience who had managed so far to keep from crying were moved as she describes sitting Josie by the window so she could feel the breeze on her face – Josie wasn't allowed out of the ward at that time, because of the fear that she might be snatched. Playing music to her, wheeling her up and down the ward, playing with different coloured lights; all of these things that Susan talks about, moves the audience to a greater appreciation of another's role in the care of our patients.

Silence.

We look across at each other; two new facilitators, just starting out on the adventure that is Schwartz Rounds. How on Earth are we going to facilitate this, our third Round? Truth is, we don't really need to say much at all. The audience need little encouragement; the emotions are all there, just waiting to come out. We hear about betrayal, hope, conflict, humour, reliance on the need to ground oneself with practicalities. We see the power in Rounds, as the four members of the panel are supported and uplifted by the swell of positive feelings from the audience.

We six are all bound together now. Four people, all brave enough to come forward and share their stories, all united their passion for the jobs they do. And us, the two facilitators who shared their experiences, and guided them through this emotional roller-coaster.