



## **Taylor McCormack's Story**

In late September 2000, Catherine McCormack brought her daughter Taylor to the emergency room after recognizing signs that the shunt that had been inserted in her brain shortly after birth might be failing. Taylor continued to deteriorate until she eventually went into cardiac arrest. Subsequent CAT scans revealed that the baby was 98% brain dead.

On Friday, October 6<sup>th</sup> 2000 John and Catherine McCormack made the agonizing decision to remove their 13 month old daughter from life support nearly six days after the otherwise healthy child entered the emergency room of a renowned Boston hospital. Taylor McCormack died approximately three hours later surrounded by her parents and two brothers.

It was an almost incomprehensible end to a seemingly routine visit to the emergency room.

Despite his anguish, John fought to have the details of his daughter's case brought to light. The McCormacks discovered that a series of entirely preventable errors and miscommunications culminated in the death of their daughter, starting with the fact that the neurosurgeon on call the evening Taylor was brought into the hospital had fallen asleep with the volume button of his pager turned off and consequently missed the page.

The McCormacks brought their grievances to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and the state's Board of Registration in Medicine. As a result of their experience with the Board of Registration in Medicine, John McCormack conceived of and was instrumental in getting the state legislature to pass Taylor's Law, which affords victims of medical errors the right to attend review Board disciplinary hearings with a lawyer and submit a victim impact statement. The grieving father went as far as working the crowd at both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions of 2004, passing out literature and telling his family's story, to gather support for the legislation.

Having already enacted a permanent tribute to the memory of his daughter, McCormack nonetheless continues on with his role as a patient safety advocate. He regularly addresses patient safety organizations, most recently speaking to the Florida Association for Healthcare Quality, has worked with a Georgia group attempting to get a Taylor's Law passed in that state, and has joined forces with the Massachusetts Nurses Association to advocate for legislation regulating nurse-to-patient ratios in hospitals. (At the time of this writing, the legislation had passed the House but not the State Senate.)

Not content to focus his energies at the local level, John McCormack has his sights set on a national platform. With the healthcare debate dominating the news cycle, he questions why President Obama hasn't reached out to the victims of medical errors and how the resulting legislation will tackle this seemingly intractable problem.

Asked what reforms he thinks healthcare legislation should address, McCormack fires back a list that includes a safety checklist for admissions, a requirement that physicians remain in the hospital while on call, a legislated nurse-to-patient ratio. He speaks passionately of the fact that simple, basic technology to keep patients safe lags dangerously behind medical technology in general and of the effect that has on the quality of care delivered.

McCormack is philosophical when pondering the reason that deaths attributable to medical errors, despite occurring at a rate of approximately 277 a day, do not receive the media attention that other, equally lethal events such as plane crashes or weather disasters receive. As he observes, medical errors are isolated incidents that affect individual families, not large groups of people simultaneously. The dramatic impact is therefore lessened in the eyes of the public, despite the cumulative effect on 277 individual families.

John McCormack doesn't plan on giving up his crusade anytime soon. Despite the searing pain that overwhelms him each time he thinks of his daughter, he is driven to honor her memory and keep the promise he whispered to her when he carried her lifeless body down to the hospital morgue nine years ago. "Taylor's never coming back ... God took her because I'm stubborn. I'm not going to take no for an answer 'til every family is protected. [I'm going to] keep knocking 'til they let me in."

*For a full account of the McCormack's ordeal, please see Chapter 5 of Sanjaya Kumar's Fatal Care – Survive in the US Health System (IGI Press, 2008)*