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Quick action and a miracle drug deliver a happy outcome

Life-threatening respiratory distress syndrome strikes just after delivery

By Mary Powers

[Contact](#)

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The grandmother and great-grandmother cooed at the newborn.

They jiggled her pink fleece-covered arm.

They called her name.

They tried nicknames.

But Te-Naya Tucker's mother just stroked her sleeping daughter's tiny hand.

The new mother sat smiling, heavily swaddled and propped up in bed, ignoring the beeping machines, the sensor attached to her finger, the thin plastic tube placed just under her nostrils to deliver extra oxygen, and the hospital staff just beyond her room.

She had a smile on her face and eyes trained on her sleeping baby.

Doctors had warned that Friday's reunion at the Regional Medical Center at Memphis might never happen. Alkiesha Tucker, Te-Naya's mother, entered The Med on Nov. 30 to have a baby. Three days later she landed in The Med's ICU near death as doctors worked to keep her alive, hoping a new treatment would tame the inflammation that threatened her oxygen supply.

"For the first 24 hours, I don't think anyone believed she was going to survive," said Dr. G. Umberto Meduri. He is a critical care specialist and University of Tennessee Health Science Center professor whose career focus has been the acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) that nearly killed Tucker.

He is scheduled to discuss the treatment she received and receive an award for his research at next month's meeting of the Society of Critical Care Medicine.

Sixty to 70 percent of patients with such a severe case of the lung problem don't make it, said Dr. Muthiah G. Muthiah, the critical care specialist who is one of Tucker's doctors and a UT Health Science Center assistant professor. On average, 30 to 60 percent of the 150,000-170,000 Americans diagnosed with ARDS annually don't survive.

It struck Tucker so quickly that Francine Banks, Tucker's mother, said initially she didn't understand just how sick her daughter was.



Matthew Craig/The Commercial Appeal

Francine Banks gets a big laugh holding her granddaughter Friday afternoon at The Med. Earlier, it was touch-and-go for the new mother, Alkiesha Tucker.

Muthiah said that's not unusual.

While the cause of ARDS isn't always apparent, it sometimes takes just hours for patients to develop life-threatening symptoms. It is a recognized complication of a range of problems including pneumonia, infections, trauma and child birth.

For Tucker, of Whitehaven, the problem appeared just hours after Te-Naya was born by cesarean section at 7:03 a.m. on Dec. 2. She weighed 6-pounds, 6-ounces and she was healthy, although Francine Banks, her grandmother, said the baby spent a few hours in The Med's intense care nursery receiving supplemental oxygen.

Tucker was still in the labor and delivery recovery room when her mother returned from walking her grandmother, Cynthia Jenkins, outside a few hours later. That's when Banks noticed her daughter's breathing had changed.

"She was taking real deep breaths. Her lips and fingers were starting to turn white," Banks said.

She was about to call a nurse when the doctor who treats her daughter's sickle cell disease stopped by and signaled an emergency.

It was 3 a.m. Dec. 3 when doctors warned Banks her daughter might die.

Banks started praying.

At first she prayed on her daughter's behalf, asking God for health and healing. As days passed and she saw doctors work to clear her daughter's lungs, she expanded her prayers to include the medical staff.

"I never gave up. I just increased my prayers," said Banks, who works for World Overcomers Outreach Ministries Church.

For two weeks, Tucker was sedated. A machine did her breathing. It forced a mixture of oxygen and nitric oxide into her lungs. For almost as long, she was tucked into a bed that rotated 360 degrees, sometimes positioning her upside down on her stomach, a treatment designed to make breathing easier.

From the first she received low doses of the steroid methylprednisolone in a bid to ease the lung inflammation. Meduri believes the drug saved her life.

Earlier this year an analysis of 91 ARDS patients treated at five Memphis hospitals found those who received the drug treatment within 72 hours of their diagnosis fared better than patients who received standard treatment. Standard treatment included breathing support and treatment of any infections or other underlying problems. Meduri directed the study.

Muthiah, who wasn't involved in Meduri's research, said the treatment is beginning to catch on nationwide. Both doctors predicted it would also save lives if a bird flu pandemic surfaces. Pneumonia, a complication of influenza infections, is a risk factor for ARDS.

Tucker's own lung function is expected to gradually improve in the coming year. "She being a young nonsmoker, she will eventually be able to run and do all the normal things," Muthiah said. Tucker, 16, is a

sophomore at Booker T. Washington.

Tucker is expected to spend at least another week hospitalized, undergoing physical therapy to help her regain strength. Te-Naya's expected to be a regular visitor.

"I think this (visit) will help her recovery, especially with the physical therapy. When she (Alkiesha) thinks about when she held her baby, that will really push her on," Banks said.

Tucker just smiled and stroked her baby's hand.

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