

Appendectomies for Madeline and Madlon

"In an old house in Paris that was covered with vines/ lived twelve little girls in two straight lines."¹ So begins the classic children's story *Madeline*, by Ludwig Bemelmans. I had read the book as a child, and thought of it occasionally when my last name, Madlon, was mispronounced. The actual plot of the story, however, I had long since forgotten.

I was recently reminded by my 8-year-old son, Aaron, that Madeline's most famous adventure was an appendectomy! Aaron had just had his own appendectomy and was eager to compare experiences. (He had already heard about his grandmother's appendectomy, performed by his great-grandfather, a physician.)

Madeline lived in a convent school in the 1930s. "In the middle of one night" Madeline sat up in bed and "cried and cried." The doctor came soon after, announced, "It's an appendix," carried Madeline to the ambulance, and "they drove out into the night. Madeline woke up two hours later, in a room with flowers."

Aaron's diagnosis and treatment were not quite so timely. When he complained of right lower quadrant pain, my initial thought was also "It's an appendix!" When he proceeded to

eat his entire supper (which I later realized included his favorite dish), I decided that we would just watch and wait. After all, a cardinal symptom of appendicitis is anorexia. The next day Aaron seemed to feel a bit better, and he even walked to the neighborhood store for a treat. Still no anorexia. But that evening he had more pain and a fever. So we "drove out into the night" to the emergency department, with Aaron complaining of pain with every pothole we hit.

Aaron was moved quickly from the emergency department to the operating room. The surgeon was not fooled by Aaron's response that, yes, he could eat a Big Mac right now.

Although Madeline's diagnosis and treatment were rapid, her hospitalization was lengthy. On the tenth postoperative day her 11 schoolmates visited her "with solemn face, with some flowers and a vase." They "then said 'ahhh,' when they saw the toys and candy and the dollhouse from Papa." Later that night "all the little girls cried, 'Boohoo, we want to have our appendix out, too!'"

Aaron's hospital stay was too short for any thoughts of secondary gain. He went home 24 hours after

his arrival in the emergency department. I knew he was ready for discharge when he walked down the hall to the vending machines to get a bag of chips. (Still no anorexia!) He did receive a helium balloon, and I rented his favorite videotape. After 2 days Aaron returned to school with a note excusing him from gym and recess. He was quite annoyed at his teacher's solicitousness.

In a wonderful picture, Madeline stands on her hospital bed, proudly showing her scar to her fascinated schoolmates. Although she is turned so that her scar is not visible, it is probably larger than Aaron's neat 1½-inch line. Nevertheless, Aaron's scar easily impressed his classmates and inspired exclamations of "awesome!" and "gross!"

Some things never change!

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Reference

1. Bemelmans L. *Madeline*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1977.