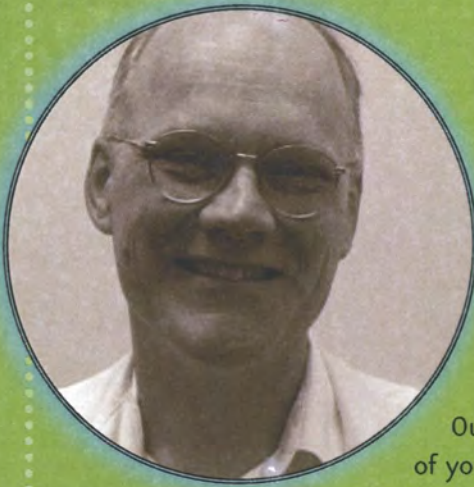


# A Late Night Trip to the Emergency Department



[ Was It The Right Thing To Do? ]



[ A Message from Dr. William Craig ]

**CROUP IS AN ILLNESS THAT AFFECTS YOUNG CHILDREN. It can come on quite suddenly and can cause severe coughing. In some cases, the child may have difficulty breathing. It is a stressful time for the parents of a young child.**

Our first goal as health care professionals is to take care of your child. Another goal is to make sure that you have the information you need to understand your child's illness. Understanding the illness and how it is treated will ease the stress that you may have when your child is sick.

This booklet includes the story of a parent like you who had a child with croup. The story tells about one family's experience. The story also includes medical information on the illness and how it is treated.

A story told through the eyes of a parent is a novel approach to passing on information. Most of us, from the very young to the very old, enjoy a good story. Stories also help us remember details – more so than reading a textbook or a scientific report.

This booklet includes one family's story but not all cases of croup are the same. Some are very mild and can be treated at home. In other cases the child should be seen by a doctor or at the emergency department.

I hope that this story will help answer some of the questions you have about croup. I also hope that you will find interest in reading other parents' stories, and that you will find comfort in knowing that you are not alone in your experience with croup.

**DR. WILLIAM CRAIG, MD**

*Director of Pediatric Emergency  
Stollery Children's Hospital, Edmonton, AB*

**> Get Info <**

For more information on croup and how it can be treated please visit the Alberta Medical Association website to find the Clinical Practice Guideline (CPG) on Croup: [www.albertadoctors.org](http://www.albertadoctors.org)

# Michael's barky cough startled Valerie from her sleep.

**FOR THE LAST FEW NIGHTS,** Valerie had not slept well as her two-year-old son was fighting a cold and had been up off and on with a fever and cough. Her first reaction was irritation – that she was going to have to spend another fitful night nursing her sick son. She desperately hoped the coughing would stop.

The lack of sleep was taking its toll. She was losing her patience with Michael and she knew she had been short with her customers at work. Couldn't they understand that she had more important things to deal with than their petty complaints? Her resentment towards her customers, and especially towards Michael, made her even more frustrated and guilty. Sometimes she just didn't feel that she was a very good mom.





More barky coughing roused her from her thoughts. This time the cough frightened her. As she ran into his room, Michael seemed to be fighting for breath.

In a panic, Valerie picked him up in her arms and ran to the phone. She grabbed the receiver, but it was already late and she wasn't sure who to call. She looked around the kitchen not knowing what to do. It was times like these when Valerie felt very alone as a single mom. Valerie was exhausted and at her wit's end – she couldn't handle one more sleepless night. She knew that she had to take Michael to the emergency department to get the help they both needed.

**> Get Connected <**

**Nurse Telecare Line:**

Capital Health Link in  
Edmonton 407-LINK

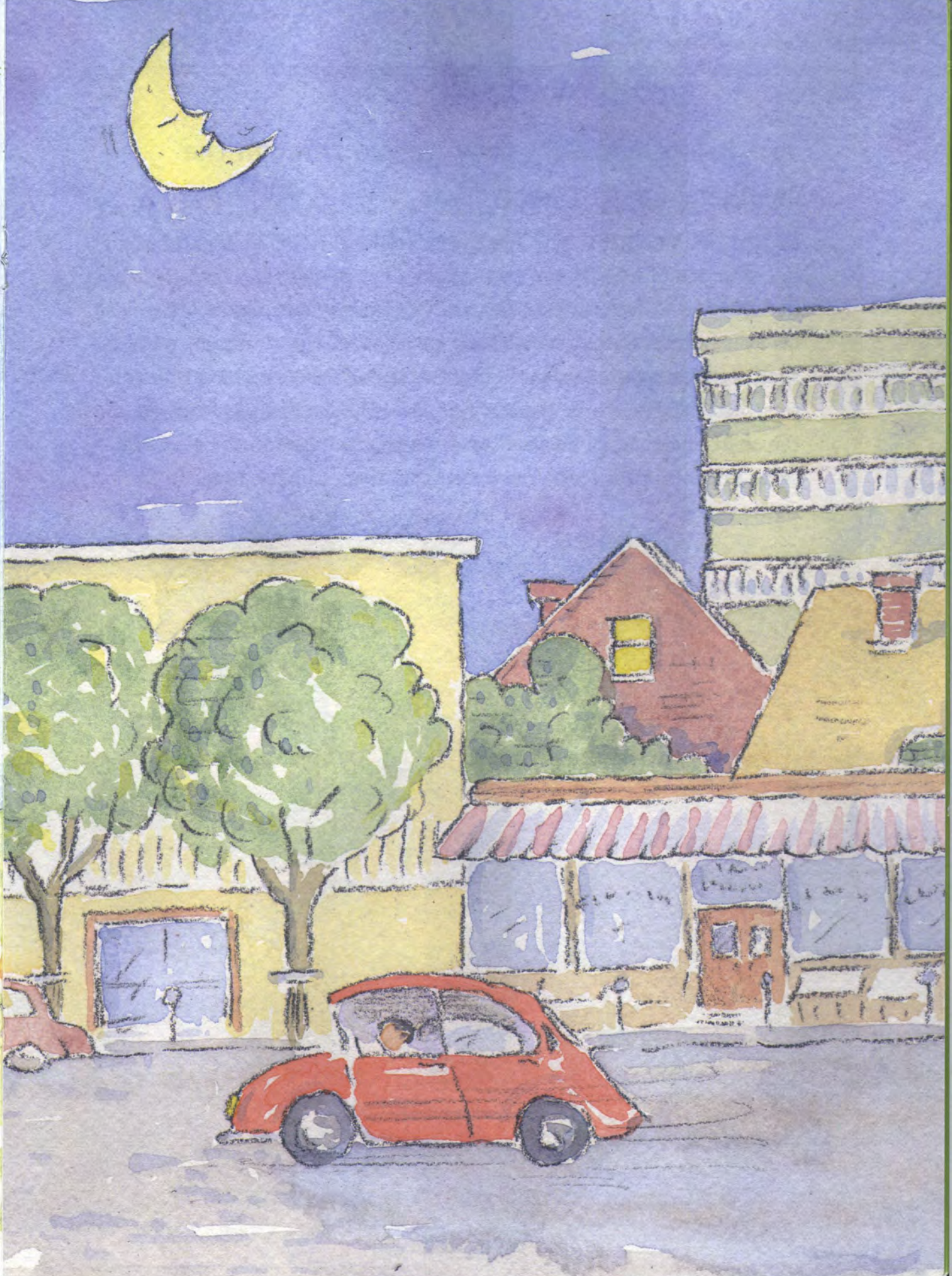
Calgary Health Link  
943-LINK

Valerie wondered how she would get to the hospital. She didn't know whether the bus would be running at this late hour and she didn't have the money for a cab.

Though it was late, she reluctantly called her neighbour whose older daughter babysat when Valerie had to work late. Valerie explained her situation and they agreed to meet out front in ten minutes.

Valerie nervously watched Michael from the front seat of the car as they raced along the empty streets. Her neighbour rolled down the window to clear the windshield and within a few minutes, Michael's coughing got a little better. Though he was still breathing very loudly and his voice sounded scratchy, he seemed calmer and happier as he babbled to them from the back seat. She was surprised that he was so wide awake at this late hour, but figured it was because of the extra long nap he had taken that afternoon.

**Take  
your child into  
cold air outdoors  
or sit by an open  
window or an open  
freezer door.**



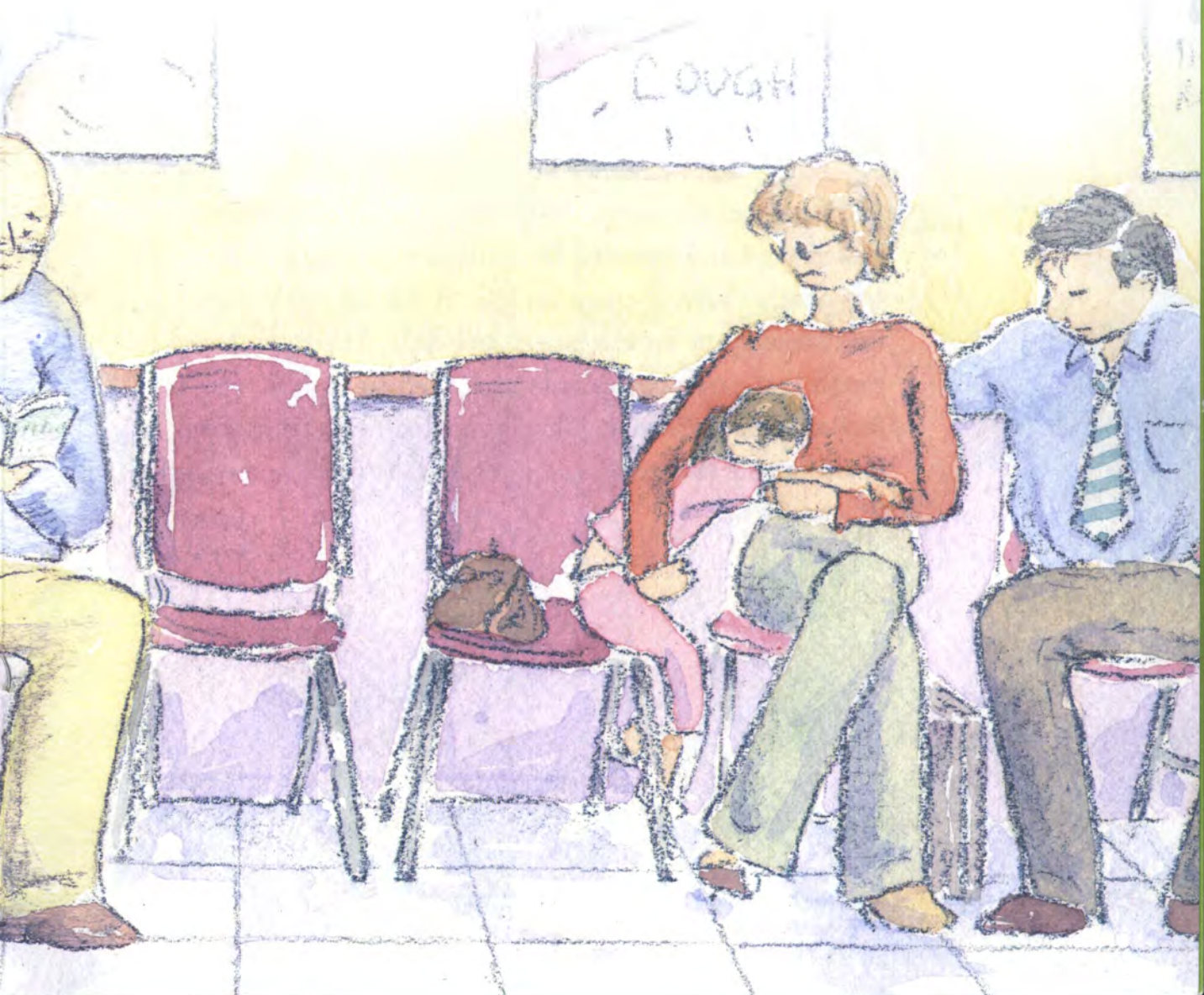
Just before midnight they walked through the emergency department doors. Within minutes of being in warmer air, Michael's breathing got worse.

He felt hot and his coughing was causing him obvious discomfort – his eyes were watering and his body trembled with each cough. Valerie sank down into the chair at the front desk and described to the nurse what had happened over the last few days. The nurse made notes on the chart and checked Michael. After talking to a doctor, she gave him some Tylenol for his fever. Then she asked them to have a seat in the waiting room.





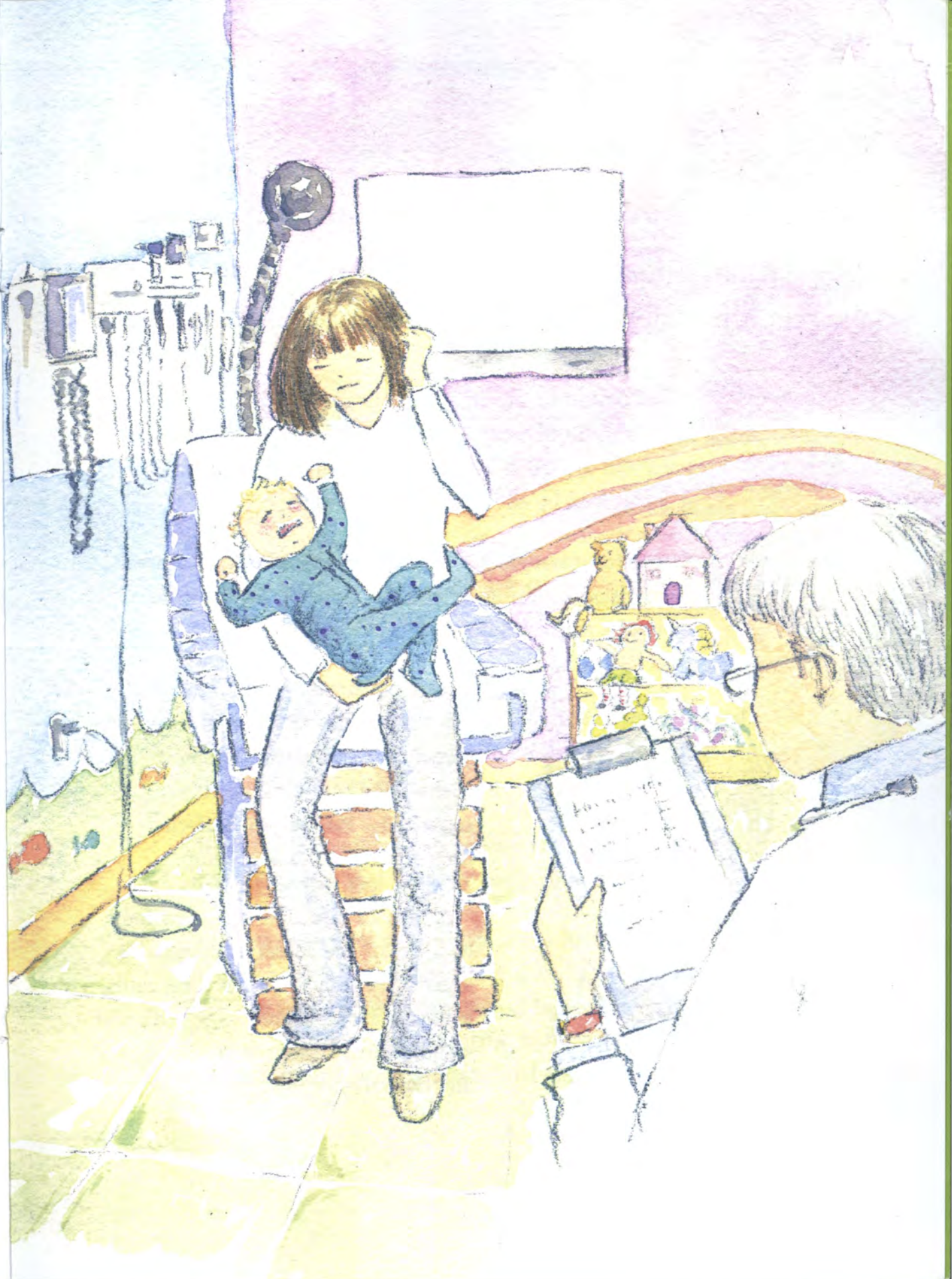
The emergency department was very busy and the wait seemed endless. Finally after three hours, Valerie and Michael were lead to an examination room. Michael was restless and hungry as he had refused to eat since late afternoon. Valerie gave him a bottle that she had packed. It did the trick. By the time the doctor arrived, Valerie doubted her decision to come to the hospital – Michael’s breathing was back to normal and the other patients looked much sicker than her son.



The doctor quickly read Michael's chart before entering the examination room. The nurse had noted the classic symptoms of croup: several days of mild fever, a hoarse voice, and a seal-like barky cough that had started late this night.

"Another case of croup", the doctor thought to himself – he had seen several cases lately as it tends to cluster in the fall and winter months.

As he entered the room, the doctor noted that the mother looked tired and stressed. He realized that though this was another case of croup for him, it was an intense and worrisome event for the parent and child. The harsh barky cough that can rouse parents from their sleep often causes fear and alarm. The coughing is startling, especially when heard for the first time, and often sounds much worse than it actually is.



“What brings you here tonight?” the doctor asked in a friendly tone as he sat down by the desk.

Valerie looked up at him apologetically and declared, “I wasn’t sure whether or not to come. He was coughing so much and seemed to be having such a hard time breathing at home. Now he already seems to be getting better.”

The doctor reassured Valerie that she should feel good about her decision – after many years as a doctor, he knew the value of a mother’s intuition.



Valerie explained to the doctor what had brought her to the emergency department. The doctor examined Michael and confirmed what he suspected – Michael was suffering from a moderate case of croup.

“Croup is an infection that is caused by a virus,” the doctor explained. He added, “this can make the vocal cords, windpipe and voice box swell – it’s this swelling that causes the hoarse voice and the barky cough”.

“I recommend giving your son a steroid called **dexamethasone**,” the doctor explained. “The steroid will help with the swelling one or two hours after taking it.”

“The nurse will bring the steroid for Michael. The medicine is sweet tasting and there are no serious side effects”.

The doctor told her that they would watch Michael for a few hours and if all was well, Valerie and her son would be on their way.

Sure enough several hours later when the doctor returned, Valerie appeared much calmer and Michael was resting comfortably in her arms.

“What if the coughing gets worse again?” asked Valerie after the doctor told her they could go home.

“In most cases the cough is worse the first night and should be gone completely within 2 to 5 days,” the doctor assured her. “You can give Michael something if he feels uncomfortable, like Tylenol, Tempra, Advil, or Motrin, but other medications such as cough syrups, decongestants, and antibiotics won’t help with croup.”

**Dexamethasone is a steroid that reduces swelling in the windpipe and voice box so the child can breathe easier and has a less harsh cough. It is a prescription medication prescribed by your doctor and available at most pharmacies.**



**VALERIE GATHERED HER CHILD AND HER BELONGINGS AND PAUSED TO THANK THE DOCTOR AS SHE LEFT THE ROOM.**

She was so relieved that she could feel the stress drain from her body and she longed to be asleep in bed. The doctor watched them go and silently wished her a peaceful night, thinking back to the many sleepless nights he had experienced when his own children were young. ■

# Signs of Croup

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Croup symptoms most often happen in late evening and at night and start quite suddenly.

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Croup often begins like a cold, but then fever, cough and difficulty breathing develop

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**Stridor:** when your child breathes in, you hear a harsh, vibrating sound. This gets worse when the child cries or coughs.

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**Barky cough:** the child may sound like a dog or a seal

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Hoarse voice

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**Cold symptoms:** fever, runny nose, irritability, decreased appetite

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**Trouble breathing:** the air passage is swollen, making it difficult for the child to breath in and out.

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Croup symptoms frequently improve on the way to medical care and may get better or worse depending on whether the child is calm or agitated.

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Croup symptoms usually improve during the day, and often happen again the next night.

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Most children are better within two days, but a small number of children have symptoms that continue for up to one week.

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# A Late Night Trip

to the Emergency Department

[ Was It The Right Thing To Do? ]



**CROUP IS A VIRAL INFECTION** of the windpipe (*trachea*) and vocal cords (*larynx*) that affects children younger than 5 years old. In children over 5 years of age, it is called laryngitis. The infection causes the lining of the throat and larynx to become red and swollen. In most cases, croup sounds worse than it actually is. Sometimes, the child may become very tired because of the extra work it takes to breathe. In very severe cases, the child's breathing can become blocked. Croup occurs most often in late fall, but can occur during any season, including summer. ■

Booklet sponsored by CIHR Team in Pediatric Emergency Medicine.



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