Doctor, remember the roof
A memory connects a physician and his young patient.

BY KAMIAB DELFANIAN, MD, MPH

I was evaluating 5-year-old Leah* during a follow-up visit for her congenital vascular syndrome. She had a combined capillary and venous malformation that I had been following for several years. During her initial visit, Leah was accompanied by her mother and grandmother; she was timid and quiet, and she clung to her grandma. She cooperated for the exam, but other than that interacted very little with me.

This time, Leah came in with her mother, who had many questions about her condition. As her mother asked question after question, Leah repeatedly interrupted, trying to tell me something about the roof of the house in which her family lived. Leah’s mom reminded her that she needed to talk to the doctor and asked her to please be quiet. Leah would abide briefly with mom’s request only to ask, “What are you going to do about the roof, doctor?” Curious, I asked Leah what was on her mind. Why was she so persistent?

Her mother finally permitted Leah to speak. As it turned out, a tornado had damaged the roof of their house a few days prior to this office visit, causing rainwater to seep through the ceiling into the living room. Leah told me how scary it was for her to see the water coming in and that she couldn’t sleep at night because of this.

Leah’s description of the problem took me back to my own childhood in a very small Kurdish village in the foothills of the Alborz Mountains off the southern coast of the Caspian Sea—an area that sees heavy rainfall, especially in fall and early spring. I lived with my sister and paternal grandmother in a one-room, dilapidated house with a shingled roof. My grandmother could not afford roof repairs and would place pots and pans in the living room to catch the rainwater and keep it from saturating the floor.

My childhood memories of the unrelenting sound of raindrops hitting the pots and pans came alive as Leah told her story. As I shared my memories of the old shingles and the leaky roof with Leah’s mother, I was overcome by emotion. I felt a tangible connection to Leah and understood the thoughts that were running through her mind. Even as an adult, when I hear the sound of raindrops, I am fearful that the rain will penetrate the roof. After a quick apology, I left the exam room for a few minutes to regain my composure.

This surreal encounter was instrumental in communicating to Leah’s mother how fear and mental anguish can have a profound impact on a child at a critical age. In retrospect, it was Leah who connected with me, rather than me with her.

After the visit, I watched Leah walk through the waiting room holding on to her mother’s hand. Before she stepped out of the office, Leah turned around with a worried look on her face and admonished me, saying, “Doctor, remember the roof.” I assure you, Leah, I always will.

Kamiab Delfanian has a solo practice in Lakeville, Minnesota, dedicated to children and adults with vascular anomalies.

*The patient’s name has been changed.