

Pumping at Work Nearly Broke Me. Here's Why.

I began my first job as a nurse anesthetist three months after the birth of my son. The transition was impossibly bumpy; navigating a new high-stakes career in anesthesia as I adjusted to parenthood would prove to be a herculean undertaking. Though I didn't yet know it, I was about to meet my new arch nemesis, the piece of the working-mom puzzle that nearly broke me: *my breast pump*. During that first year as a new mom and anesthesia provider, I encountered outrageously subpar pumping accommodations, inappropriate comments, and awkward moments that seem almost too absurd to be true. Buckle up.

Sharing is Caring... Except When Your Boobs are Out

Our "pump room" was actually a shared call room where anesthesia providers slept overnight between trauma cases. Predictably, this caused mayhem. One morning I walked in on a colleague in her underwear, sleeping off a rough night of call. (My bad, Donna.) Another day a male colleague waltzed in while I was pumping, *failed to leave*, and stayed to chit-chat for ten minutes. He then paused mid-monologue and asked, "What is that noise?" Apparently he had no idea what I was doing in his call room with my scrub top half off until I responded in a bewildered tone, "*I'm pumping*." He made accidental eye contact with my nipples and slunk out in horror. That poor man may never be the same. Can someone please check on him?

Privacy? What Privacy?

I rotated through another hospital with a repurposed old office as a pump room. For some inconceivable reason this door didn't even latch, much less lock. I tried to prop the door closed with an old keyboard so it wouldn't swing open, but my jerryrigged solution would often fail mid-pump. I'd awkwardly maneuver around the tiny room to block the door with my chair wheels, losing the seal on my flanges and sloshing milk around as I scrambled. I maintained my privacy in that room mostly via hopes and prayers.

The Pump Room From My Nightmares

One day I arrived at work to find a new employee actually working in that repurposed office. She was aware that she had moved into the pump room, but she had a solution! She showed me to a large open office with ten people working at computers, pointing to a corner surrounded by a small foldable barrier that obscured almost nothing. She suggested I pump in this open room behind that little barrier surrounded by strangers, sitting at a desk where I'd face a ground floor window (lacking window coverings, of course) within easy view of hospital visitors in the public courtyard. I politely declined.

Too Many Moms, Not Enough Space

My alternative to this pump-room calamity was an actual pump room on the other side of the hospital. Two problems: it was so far away that the commute ate up my entire break, and the room was *always* in use. Through the grapevine I learned that other moms pumped in unused patient rooms, so on a particularly desperate day I held my breath and gave it a go. A housekeeper walked in to clean and froze in astonishment, and I muddled through a Spanish-language explanation of what on earth I was doing in there so that she would leave. As I watched her depart, I marinated in shame and exhaustion as my pump extracted an equal mix of breastmilk and sanity from my body. Tears were involved.

Male colleagues making it weird

One anesthesiologist had a habit of offering me a pump break by wagging his eyebrows and squeezing his hands in front of his chest as if honking pretend breasts. Truly horrifying. Another once asked me, “Are you ready to go, uh, *take care of yourself?*”, his tone dripping with innuendo. I don’t know what he imagines to be happening in that pump room, but I do know for certain that this man does not have children. Some treated my pump breaks as an enormous inconvenience; others were overly delicate as if appalled to be imagining an activity involving breasts. As a new member of the anesthesia team, I had hoped to connect with my colleagues; instead, we spent our limited time together awkwardly discussing my boobs.

Lessons Learned

What I lacked during that brutal first year of working parenthood was a mentor, perhaps a fellow mom in health care who could offer me a hug, a snack, and some advice. I suspect she would have encouraged me to advocate for myself. As outrageous as it seems now, I never complained about the inadequate time and space to pump. I have always been skilled at advocating for my patients, but it took me much longer to learn the art of advocating for myself. As a young woman I never felt empowered to ask for what I needed, to take up space, to demand better. I wasn't certain I deserved it. Five years later I am a different person, confident and assertive. Though I can't go back in time and change the way I handled this catastrophe, I can encourage you to be braver than I was. Ask for what you need. Take up space. Demand better. You have the [right to pump at work](#) with reasonable accommodations; it's literally a federal law. Don't let yourself be bullied into accepting anything less.

I also wish I had been kinder to myself. I felt so much pressure to avoid formula at all costs that I wouldn't even consider breaking up with my pump. Ultimately I did buckle under the strain of pumping under such subpar circumstances, and I struggled enormously with guilt as I transitioned my son to formula. What I didn't understand at the time is that my son would later grow into the most remarkable little boy, loving and silly and sharp as a tack, and no amount of formula could change that. It turns out that he needed a mom with her sanity intact more than he needed breastmilk. Repeat after me: Formula. Isn't. Poison. If you're secretly dying to stop pumping at work, *you are allowed to make that decision.* Tame that mom guilt (it takes practice) and bid your pump a fond farewell. It's going to be okay.

Lacking a magic wand, I can't conjure up a mentor to walk you through the challenges of pumping at work. But I can encourage you to seek one out for yourself. Prepare to advocate for yourself, to fight for what you need as you wade through the murky waters of new working mom life. Give yourself a break and set down that mom guilt you carry around with you before it gets too heavy. Cheer yourself on as you pump at work and be kind to yourself when it's time to be done. And remember - when the system fails to make space for you, you are entitled to carve out that space for yourself.