A 41-year-old male presented in the ER with chest pains. He was tachycardic at 142, had a pulse ox of 91, clammy skin and admitted to shortness of breath. His BP was 156/90. He said that he had been at his desk when this started about fifteen minutes ago and a coworker drove him to the hospital.

The patient’s EKG showed a “tomb stone” pattern and his blood enzymes confirmed an MI. He was given sublingual nitroglycerin and stabilized in the E. R. He was then transferred to ICCU.

The next day during rounds his medical history was presented to a group of medical students by the attending cardiologist. They were told that the patient was very athletic and competed in 5 and 10 K races on a regular basis. His lipids were unremarkable as was his BP and glucose. He has no familial history of early onset coronary heart disease. This event came as a surprise to all parties including his primary care doctor.

As the attending physician was going over this material with the medical students, the patient went into ventricular tachycardia and then ventricular fibrillations as the crash cart arrived. The team worked on the patient for 27 minutes and then the attending pronounced the time of death. Since it was shift change time and the team was on well past their usually quitting time it was agreed between the two shifts that the next team would disconnect the patient.

The attending physician went from the patient’s room to meeting with the family and explaining to them what had just taken place and that the patient had died. The doctor was called out of the meeting and asked to come to the patient’s room. As he walked in the door he saw that the patient’s monitor, which otherwise would have been disconnected 7 minutes earlier, was now registering ventricular tachycardia.

What should be done at this time? Would it be medically and or ethically responsible to attempt another resuscitation? What should the family be told? Did the attending cardiologist call the time of death prematurely? Can this be a lesson for future planning? What should the family be told?