

“Our baby boy’s body was shutting down before our eyes. He had no veins to put a line in. It was beyond scary.”

Robert Chapman



Robert Chapman with his children



Sam Chapman, a few months after leaving hospital



Sam with his mum, Sally, and baby sister Emma. She was just two weeks old when Sam fell ill

Sam Chapman was nearly three when he contracted chickenpox eight years ago, a relatively mild, common childhood illness in most cases. Sam had always been a healthy, happy child and his parents, Robert and Sally, soon sensed there was something very, very wrong. As his condition deteriorated, the family GP quickly confirmed their fears – Sam was seriously ill.

The Chapmans rushed their son to their local hospital, but doctors were unable to insert the central line Sam needed to deliver vital drugs.

Robert recalls the harrowing events of that day, at a time when using scanners to assist with central lines was rare. **“Our baby boy’s body was shutting down before our eyes. He had no veins to put a line in. It was beyond scary.”**

As Sam’s situation got more and more desperate, the decision was taken to move him to the only Paediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) in the region – at Addenbrooke’s.

By this point, he was so gravely ill that he required three central lines. And once again, Robert and Sally watched as doctors battled to manoeuvre them into his fragile body using touch and good judgment alone. Eventually the tubes were in and Sam finally started receiving the medicine that every person in the room hoped would save his life.

Then the waiting began. For three of the longest days and nights, Robert and Sally kept a vigil beside Sam’s unconscious, ventilated body. All they could do was quietly sing his favourite nursery rhymes, stroking his tiny hand.

“His beautiful brown eyes were taped shut, and there were wires and tubes everywhere,” remembers Robert. **“That one small body could have so much stuff coming in and out of it beggars belief.”**



Sam today, with members of the Addenbrooke's PICU team

At one point a group of consultants stood over the toddler. Robert still pales and his voice catches as he describes hearing the news that Sam was suffering from a rare complication from the chickenpox, resulting in septic shock, septicaemia and cellulitis. **“One of them said ‘if we can get him right’ and when I heard that ‘if, that was the most dreadful moment of my life. I realised we might have to let our precious, precious Sam go.”**

The couple felt utterly helpless. **“All you can do is put your hope in those people and leave them to do what it is they do,”** says Robert. **“And they were brilliant. We couldn't speak more highly of them.”**



Sam and Dr Rob Ross Russell, one of the team that saved his life

On day four, the monitors that Robert and Sally had been scanning obsessively finally began to show small indications that brave little Sam had pulled through. The central lines were gradually removed, and after eight days their son was taken off his ventilator, breathing on his own once more.

In the days and weeks that followed, Sam continued to make excellent progress. Eight years later, he's a healthy child (Sam recently won a sports scholarship to St Joseph's College, Ipswich, and has been selected to play county cricket) who remembers nothing of his brush with death.

But for Robert, it's an experience he'll never forget.

“After something like this you look at life very differently,” he says. **“We count our blessings and realise what's important every day.”**

The Chapman family



To help PICU buy a dedicated scanner that would have made Sam's treatment easier, please donate to the Dolphin Appeal today. Return the form or visit www.act4addenbrookes.org.uk