

# My First Transfusion

What you need to know about getting blood



by Thea Gagliardi and Nancy Stefin  
illustrations by Erin Warkentin

**© 2012 McMaster Transfusion Research Program,  
McMaster University. All rights reserved.**

**This project was supported in part by Canadian  
Blood Services and Health Canada who provide  
some infrastructure funding for the McMaster  
Transfusion Research Program (MTRP).**

**Special thanks to:**

**Dr. Carol Portwine, MD, FRCPC, & family**

**Nancy Heddle, MSc., FCSMLS(D)**

**Lindsay Wizowski, BScN, MEd**

**Janie Lappan, RN, BScN, MEd, CPHON**







My name is Alice and this is the story of my first blood transfusion.

One day the nurse told my mom and me that she would need to take some blood to see if I needed to get more blood, which is what a transfusion is.

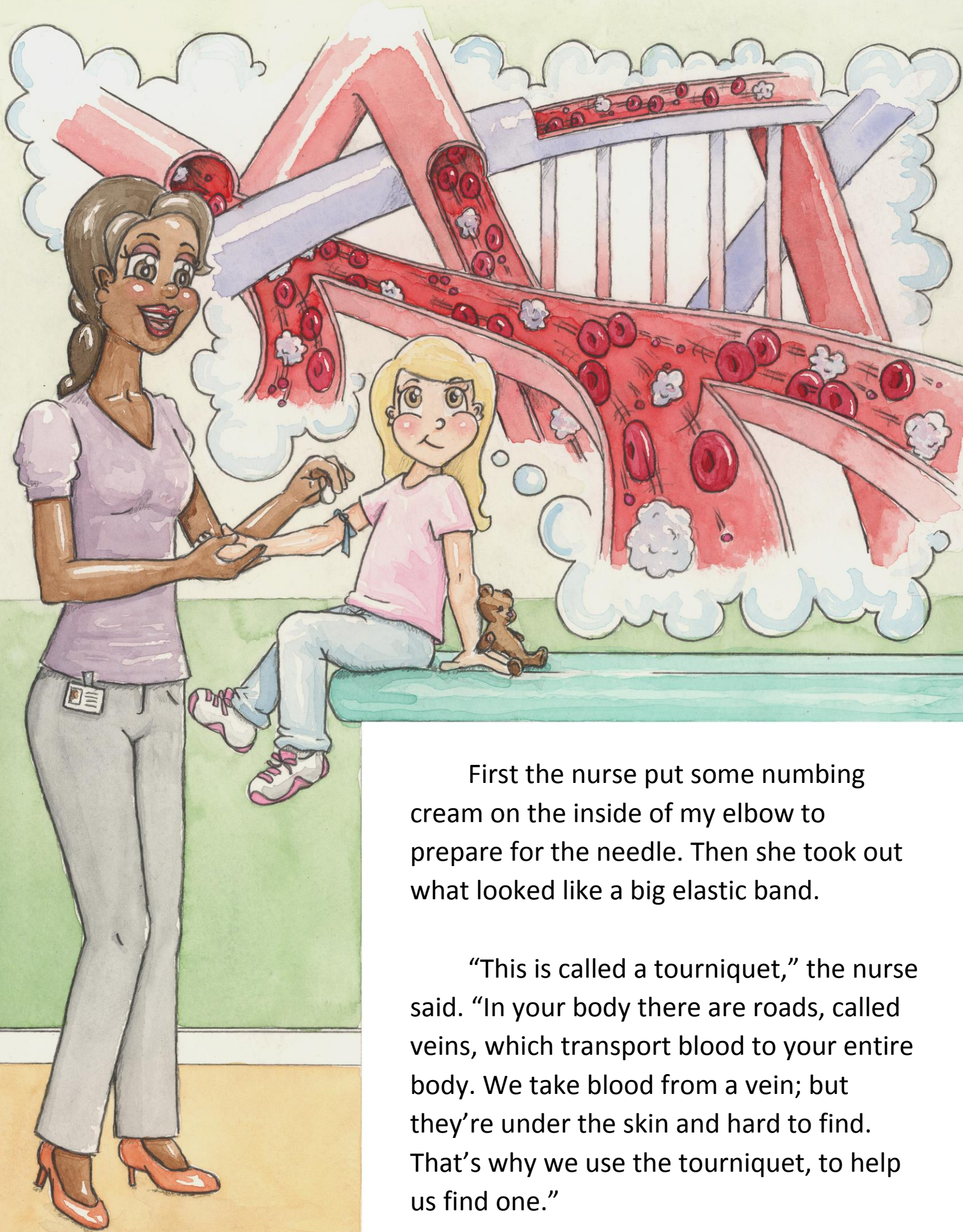




“How can you tell if I need one?” I asked.

The nurse replied, “We take some blood to check what you need more of. There are four main parts to your blood: red cells, platelets, white cells and plasma. Checking your blood lets us find out how much of each part you have.”

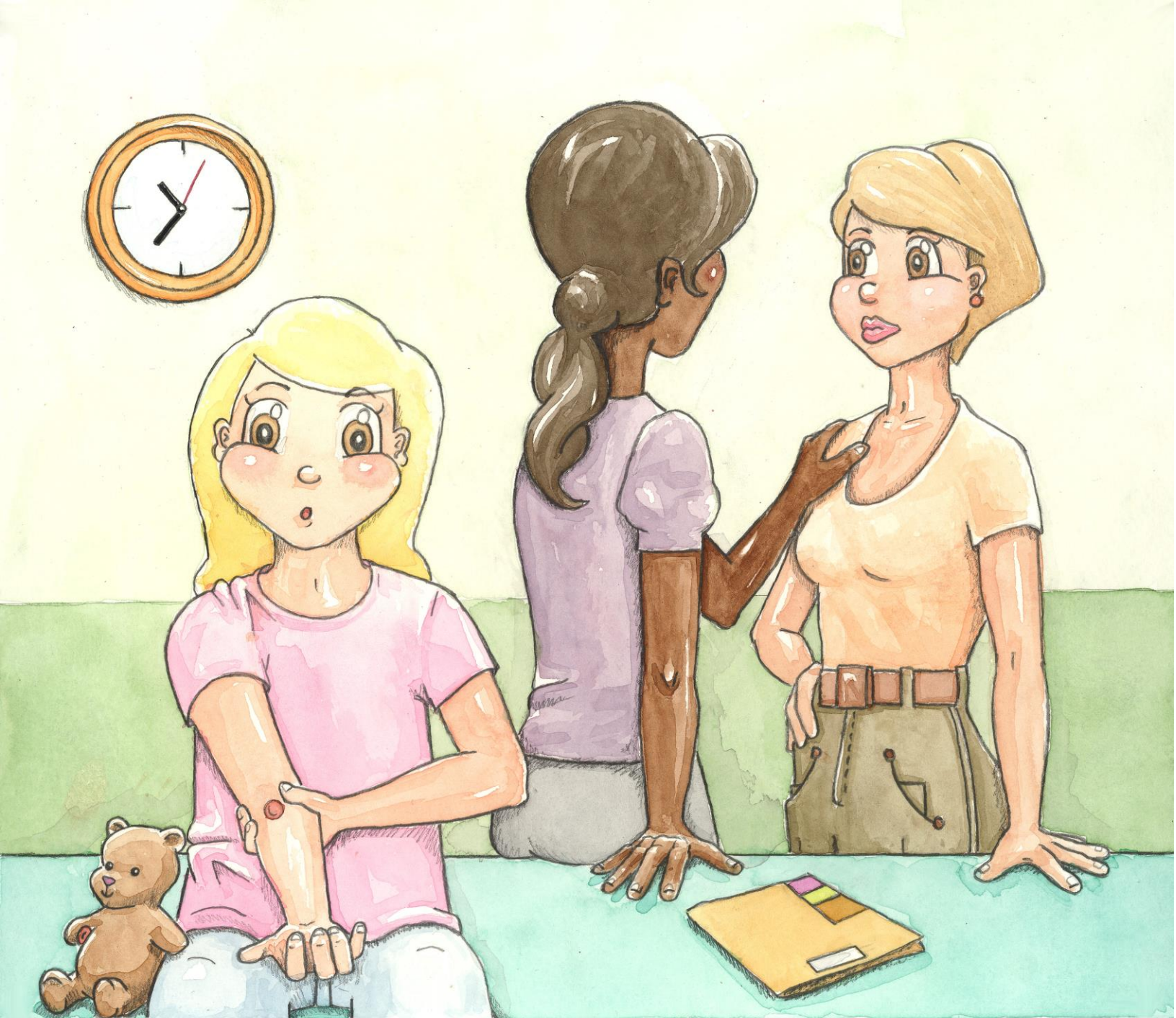




First the nurse put some numbing cream on the inside of my elbow to prepare for the needle. Then she took out what looked like a big elastic band.

“This is called a tourniquet,” the nurse said. “In your body there are roads, called veins, which transport blood to your entire body. We take blood from a vein; but they’re under the skin and hard to find. That’s why we use the tourniquet, to help us find one.”

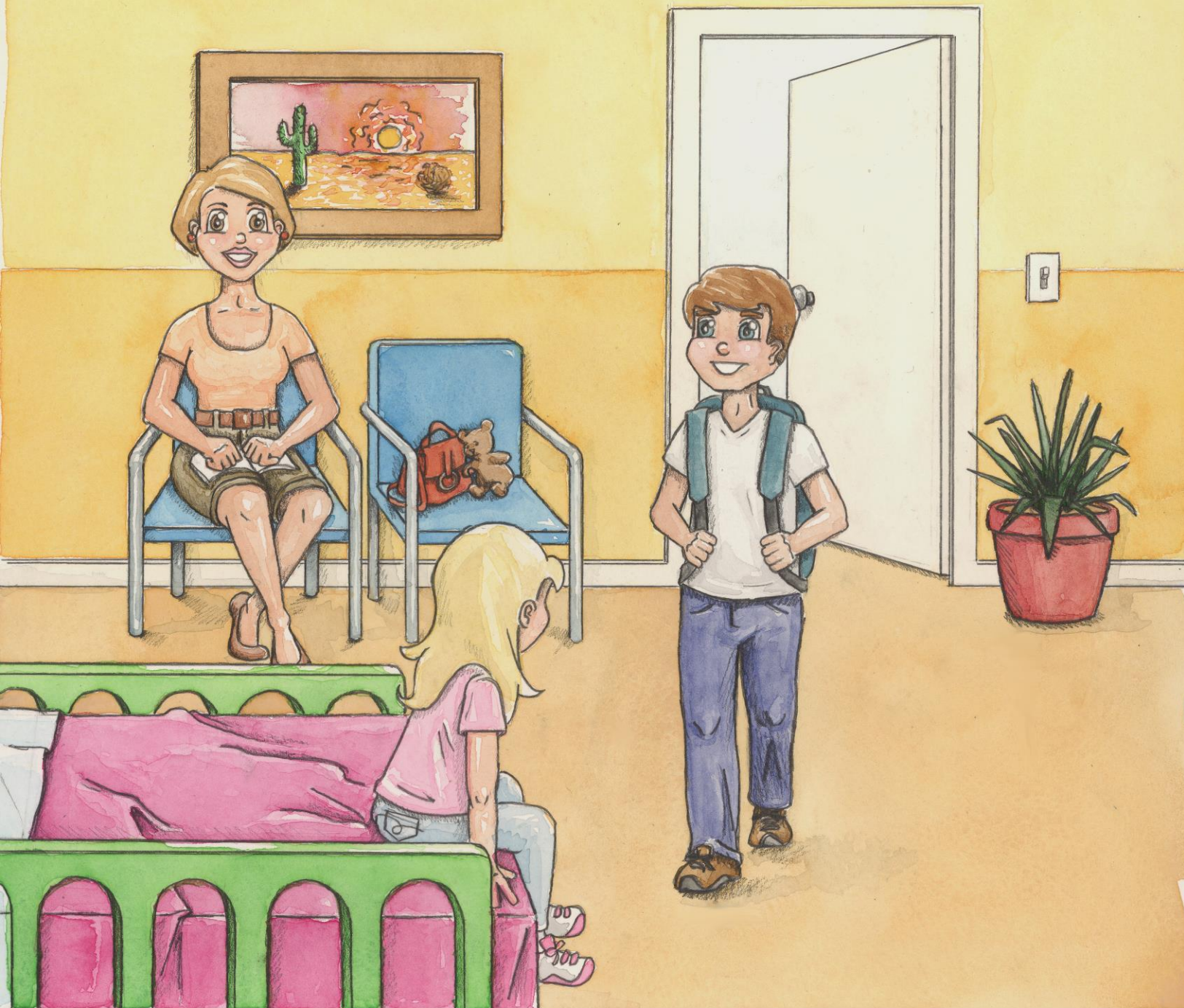




As she said this, she tied the tourniquet around my arm. Next the nurse inserted the needle, but it didn't really hurt because of the numbing cream. She got some blood, untied the tourniquet, took the needle out, and put a band-aid on my arm.

It didn't take too long for the results to come back. The blood that the nurse took showed that I needed a transfusion of red blood cells.





My mom suggested that since my friend Jeff has had many transfusions before, he could come to see me for my first one.

When he arrived, he was carrying a large blue bag.

“What’s in it?” I asked but he wouldn’t tell me.

“It has to be a surprise!” He exclaimed.





Jeff sat with me in my hospital room and I asked him why they needed to take my blood and where they took it.

"They had to test your blood so they give you the right type. If they don't give you the right type, it won't help your body. They sent your blood to the blood lab to be tested.

"What happens there?" I asked.

"The laboratory (or lab) in the hospital does a lot of different kinds of tests. This time they're testing your blood to see what type it is. The different blood types are: A, B, AB, and O. The blood that they give you will work with your blood type," said Jeff.

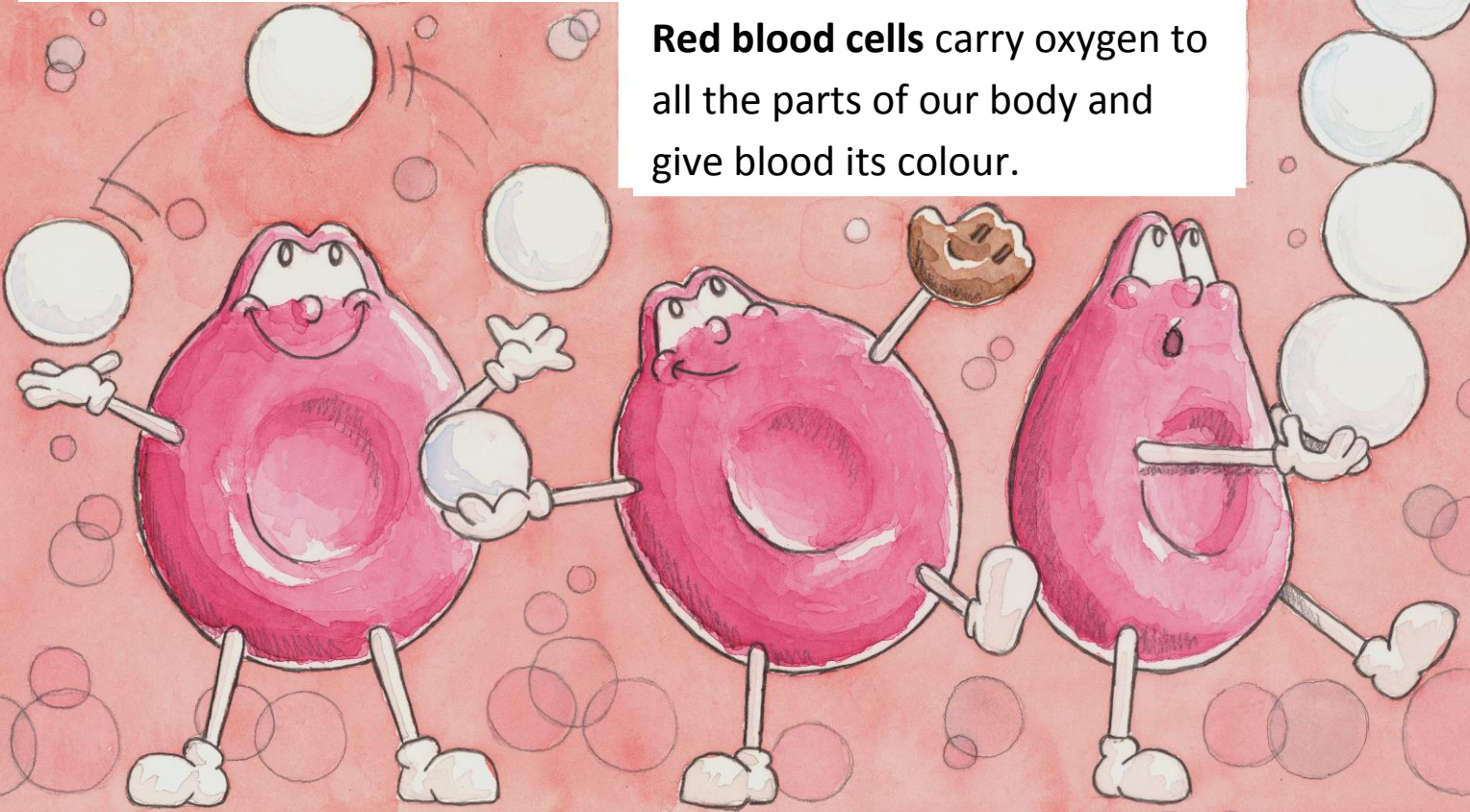


“Why do I need a blood transfusion?” I asked.

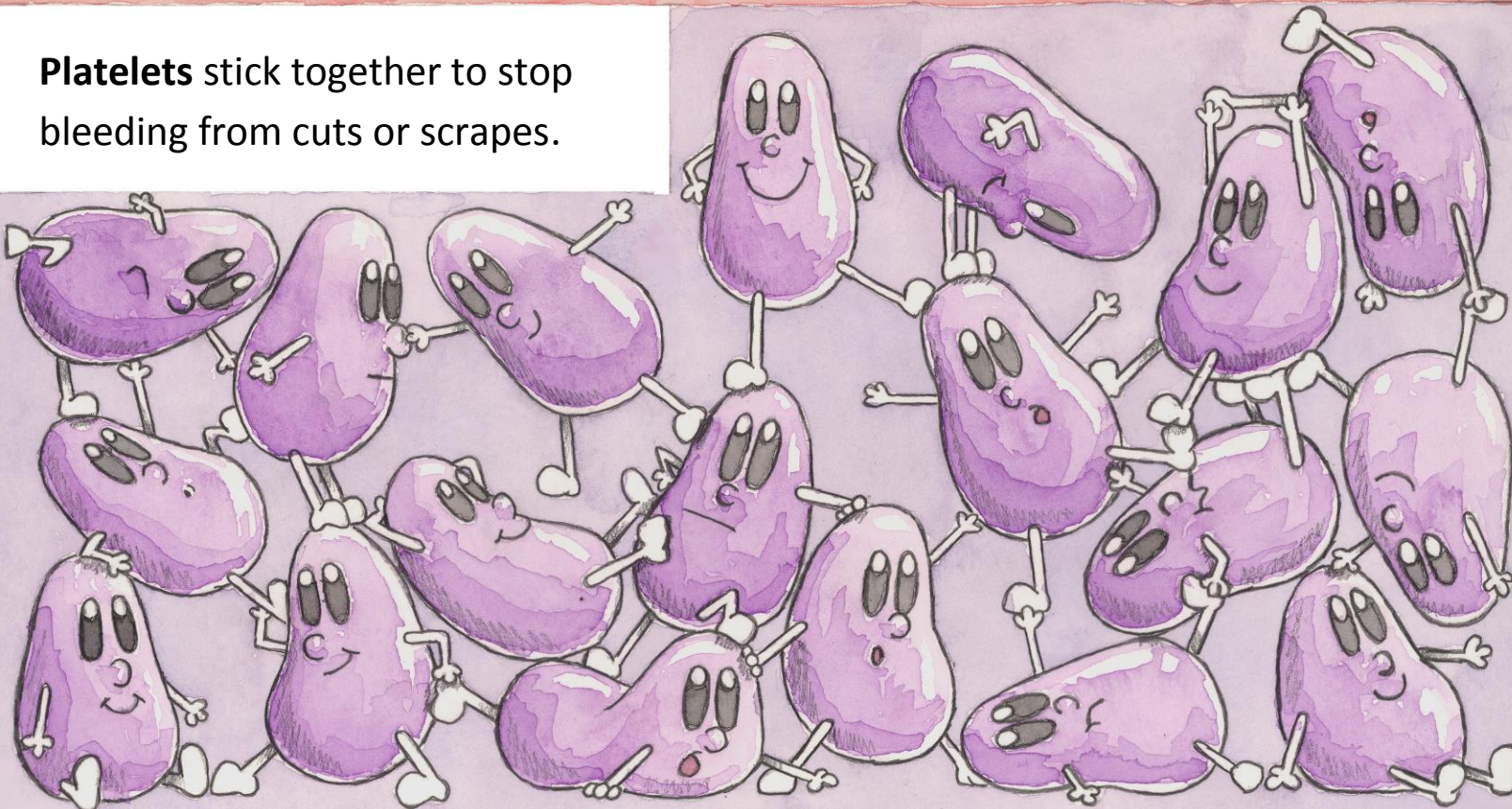
“Do you know how there are four main parts to your blood?” Jeff asked.

“Well each part of your blood has a different job to do...”

**Red blood cells** carry oxygen to all the parts of our body and give blood its colour.

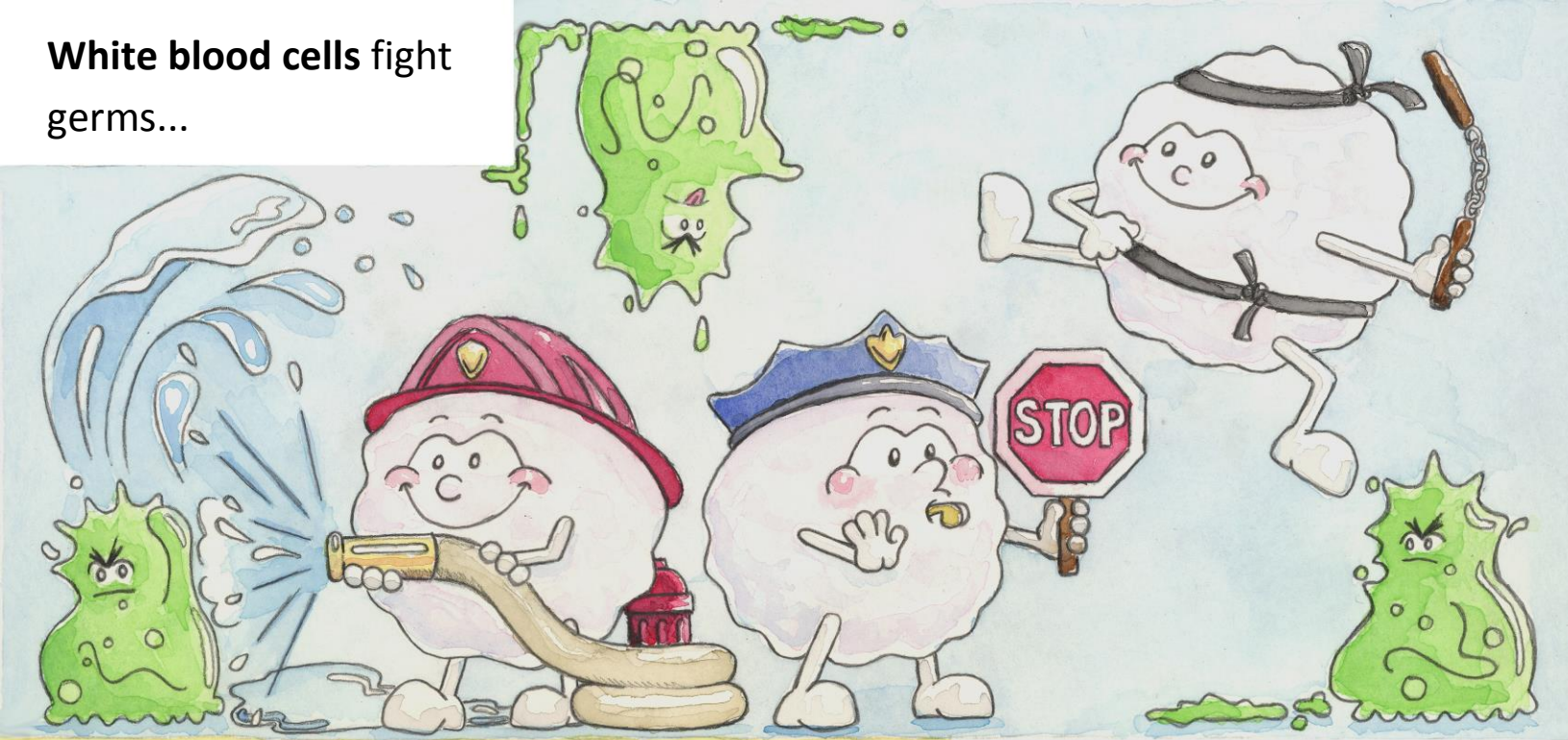


**Platelets** stick together to stop bleeding from cuts or scrapes.

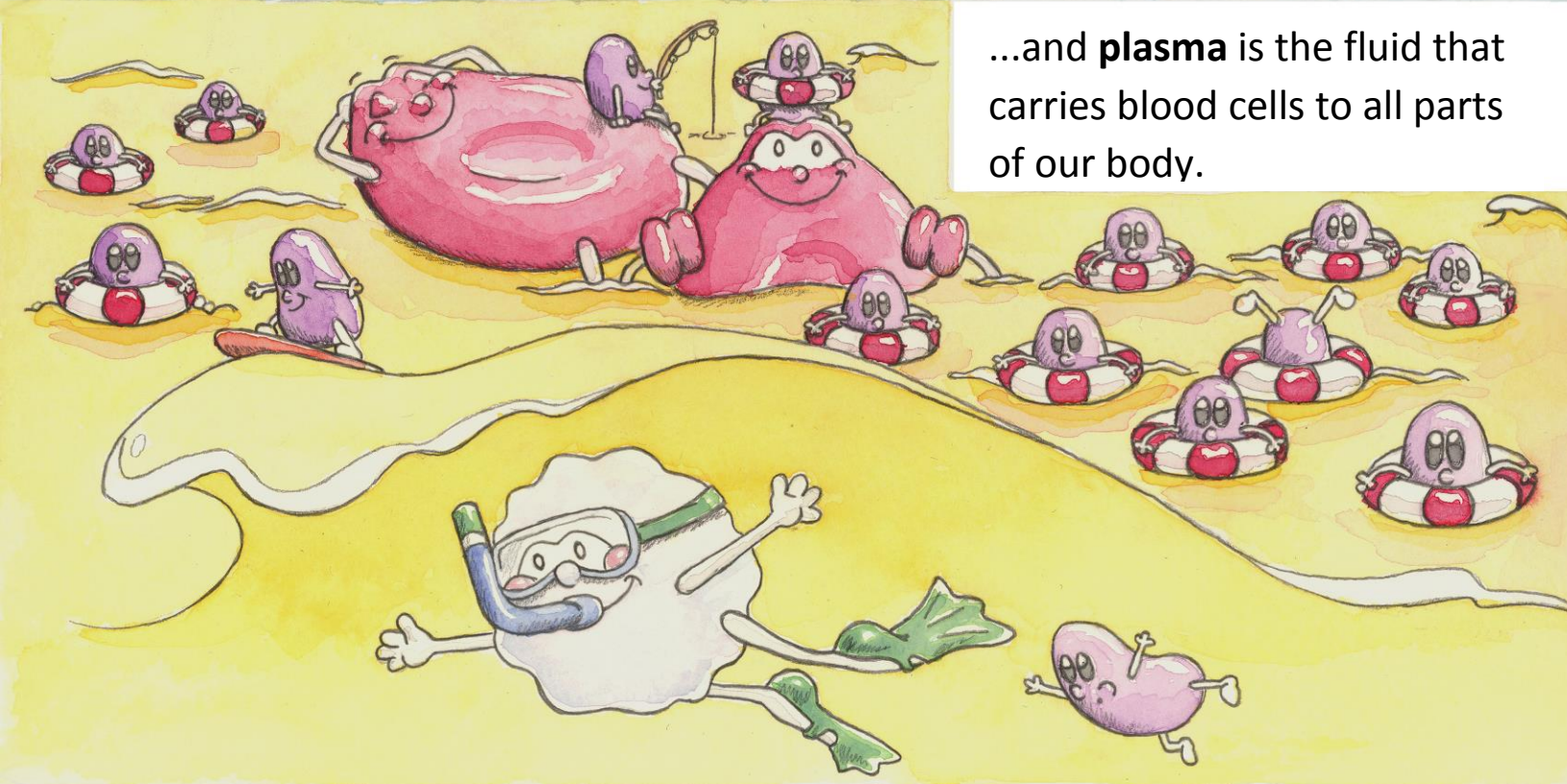




White blood cells fight germs...



...and **plasma** is the fluid that carries blood cells to all parts of our body.



"When you don't have enough of one part or some of the parts, then the blood can't do its job to keep you strong and healthy.

"That's when you need a blood transfusion, so that you can receive more of the part or parts of the blood you need," Jeff explained.

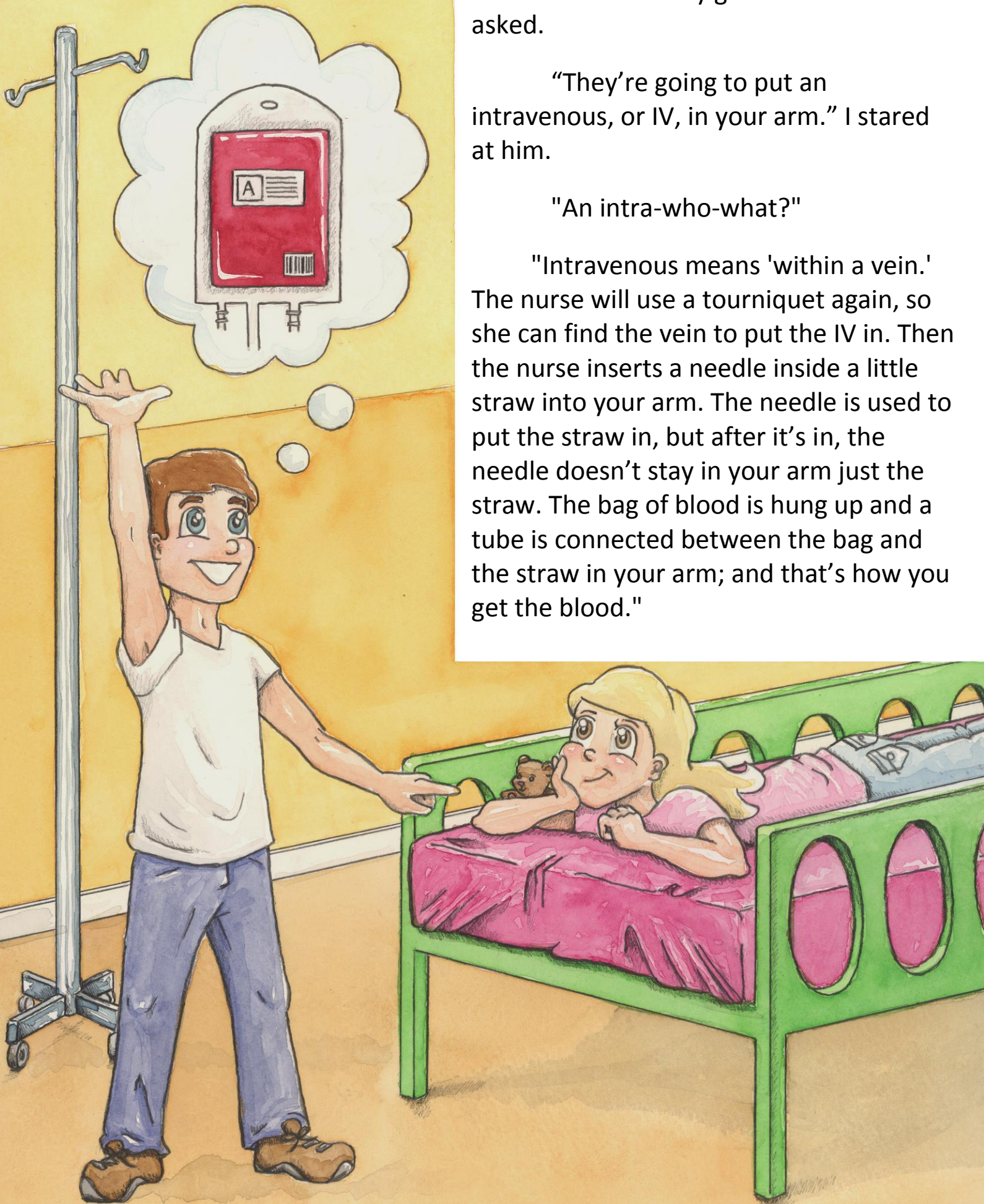


"How do they give me the blood?" I asked.

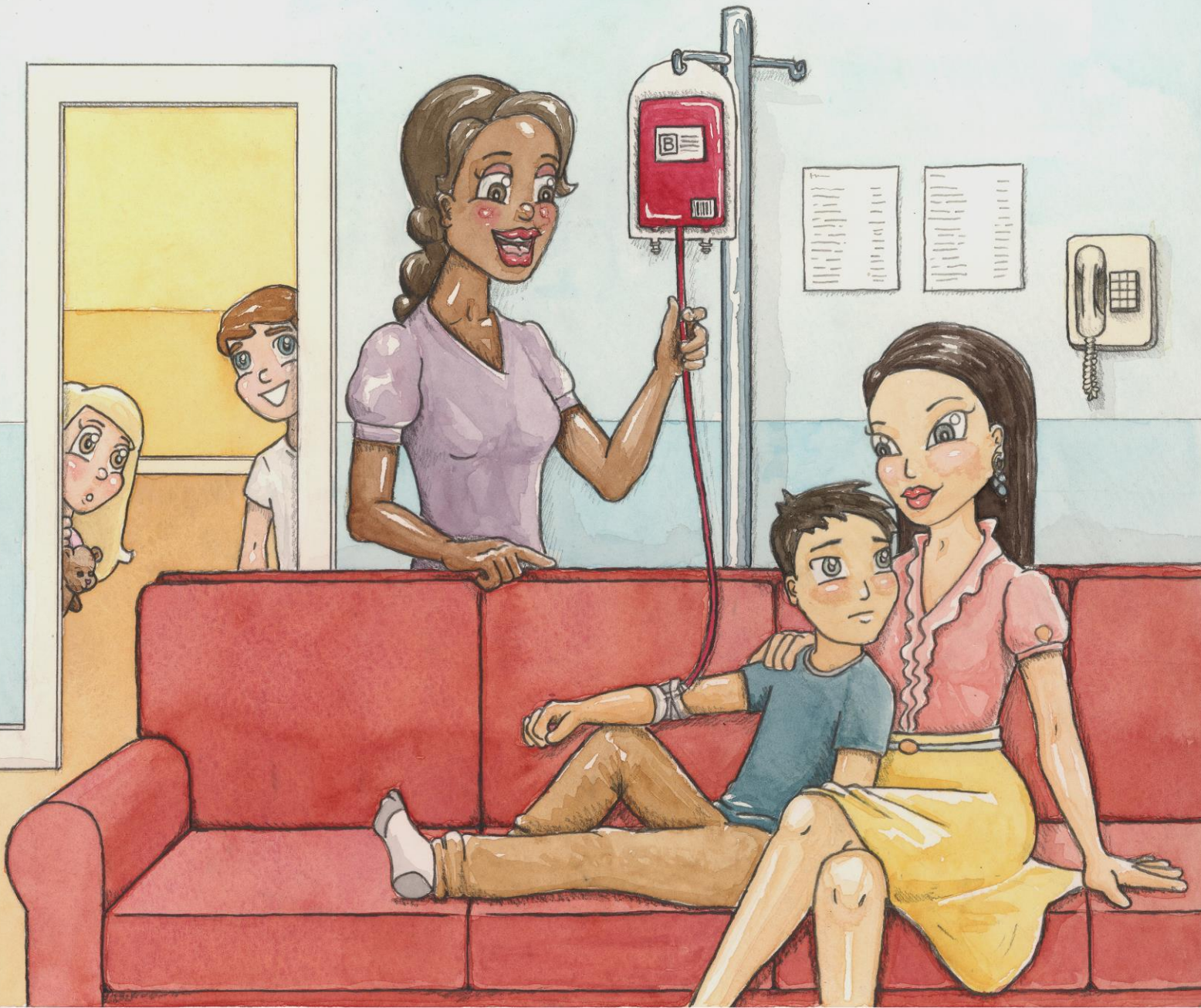
"They're going to put an intravenous, or IV, in your arm." I stared at him.

"An intra-who-what?"

"Intravenous means 'within a vein.' The nurse will use a tourniquet again, so she can find the vein to put the IV in. Then the nurse inserts a needle inside a little straw into your arm. The needle is used to put the straw in, but after it's in, the needle doesn't stay in your arm just the straw. The bag of blood is hung up and a tube is connected between the bag and the straw in your arm; and that's how you get the blood."







“And this blood they’re giving me...” I began. “Is it safe? I mean, I’m getting someone else’s blood aren’t I?”

Jeff smiled.

“Of course! It’s very safe. They test all of the blood to make sure it can’t make anyone sick. Occasionally, some people don’t feel well or get itchy during a transfusion. But the nurse checks on you just in case you don’t feel well. That way, if you’re feeling a little sick, the nurse can give you medicine to make you feel better.”





“Phew! I was pretty worried.” I said. I glanced over at Jeff’s blue bag. “So when are you going to tell me what’s in there?” I couldn’t stand not knowing!

As I asked, the nurse came in with a bag of blood and began to set up for the transfusion. Jeff reached for the bag.

“Let’s open it up and find out!” Inside were our favourite movies, games and stories.

“Well the procedure can take anywhere from about 1 to 4 hours so we might as well make the best of it, right?”

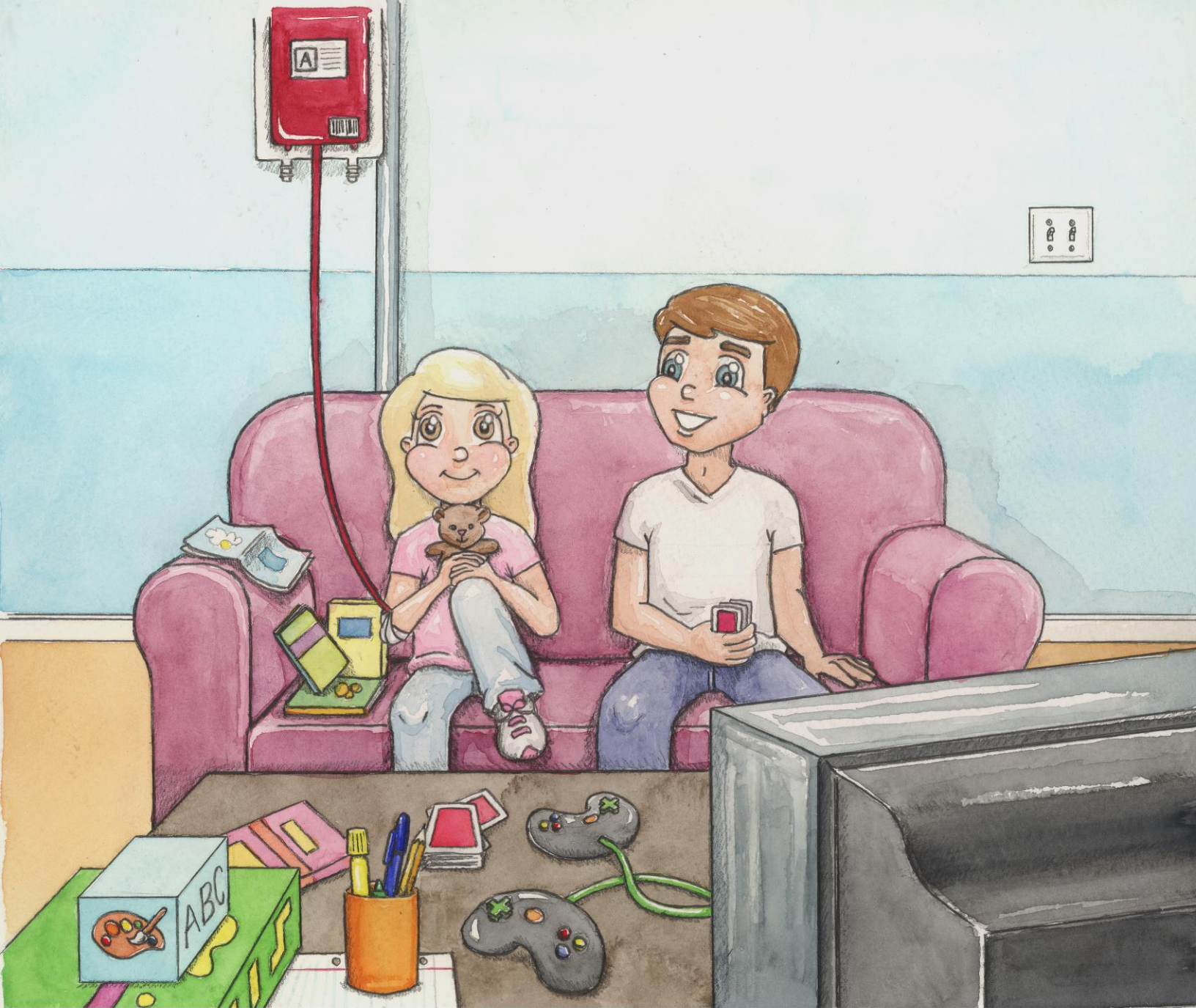




I was a little nervous when the transfusion started, but I got to have more numbing cream. I had to have the tourniquet again; I remembered it's to make it easier for the nurse to find my vein.

The nurse put in the IV, which was a bit scary. It felt like a little pinch, but after that it was better and I didn't feel so nervous.





The nurse checked on me during the transfusion to make sure I was okay and that I didn't feel sick or anything.

"Go Fish?" Jeff asked.

"Don't mind if I do," I said as I took the cards and began shuffling them out for Mom, Jeff and I.

During the rest of the transfusion we played card and video games, read stories, and watched part of a movie.





Soon enough, the bag was empty and the transfusion was over. At the end, the nurse came to take the IV out and do a final check on me to make sure I still felt well.

In fact, I felt fine afterwards, even a little energetic. We packed up all of the things from Jeff's blue bag and said goodbye.

And the next time I needed a transfusion, I brought a bag of my own.





Erin Warkentin is a graduate of the Bachelor of Health Sciences (Honours) program at McMaster University. She is studying Biomedical Communications at the University of Toronto in pursuit of a career in medical illustration.

This is Erin's first illustrated publication and she will always remember the McMaster Transfusion Research Program (MTRP) as the starting point of her career.

Nancy Stefin is a Certified Child Life Specialist at McMaster Children's Hospital. She has worked at McMaster for 9 years, and currently works in the hospital's Pediatric Outpatient Hematology/Oncology Clinic. She has an Honours B.A. in Psychology and a Diploma in Child Life Studies from McMaster University.



Thea Gagliardi is a graduate of the Bachelor of Journalism program at Ryerson University in Toronto. She has worked with MTRP for three summers and with the Ontario Regional Blood Coordinating Network for one summer.

*My First Transfusion* has been a work in progress since the summer of 2008, and after many edits made it to the final stages of production in 2012.

