

2013

Clinical Exemplar

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SNOWFLAKES

Mr. K's surgical procedure was anterior cervical laminectomy with fusion. The anesthesiologist's report to me included Mr. K's history of alcohol abuse, daily ingestion of large amounts of narcotics for intractable pain, and worst of all, the fact that my patient was homeless. Dr. W said to me, "You are the perfect nurse for Mr. K. He needs lots of TLC." I braced myself for the challenge ahead.

As soon as Mr. K started to awaken, he began to moan and complain of excruciating pain which he rated at "15" on the 0-10 pain scale. He assured me that he was not trying to be difficult – that he was in "misery" as he called it. I began medicating him immediately with Hydromorphone (Dilaudid) and gave the maximum that the anesthesiologist had ordered, followed by initiation of the PCA which was programmed to give him medication every ten minutes.



After several PCA doses, he still complained of severe pain, but rated it at 10, so I felt that I had made progress. Mr. K was very emotional at times and I was encouraged by my peers to administer Versed. I decided instead to try to determine why Mr. K was so emotional. He told me that he was realized he was in the hospital to have surgery, but he was concerned that he would be "kicked out" as soon as he was fully awake because he was homeless. He said this was the pattern of his life. He continued to cry as I held his hand and tried to comfort him.





I re-oriented Mr. K, assuring him that his surgery had been done and he was doing well. I held his hand, and insisted that he look at me. I assured him again of where he was, and again identified myself as his nurse. I further assured him that kicking him out was not a practice at St. Jude and that he could rest well in his clean, warm bed. I reminded him that he would not have to leave the hospital until he was well enough to do so.

This re-assurance immediately calmed Mr. K and he asked for his children. I called for his sons to come to the PACU and within a few minutes, Mr. K was being hugged and re-assured by his two young adult sons. Because of Mr. K's emotional state, I decided to allow his family to visit for half hour instead of the usual five minutes. I involved his sons in giving ice chips to Mr. K and informed him of every detail of his care.

At the end of the visit, Mr. K was more relaxed and thanked me profusely for all I had done. He hesitated to make any requests, but admitted that he was hungry. I fed him some Jello and it was during this time that he shared some of his life story with me. He was a professional who had lost his job. Hard times and bad investments had led to his homelessness but he was thankful that his children were still a part of his life. He was a widower. I felt great compassion for Mr. K as I realized how vulnerable we all are. Behind the homelessness and despair was a real person who simply needed to feel that there was a place for him, and that someone cared.

After two hours in the PACU, I prepared to take Mr. K to his room on the orthopedic floor. He rated his pain as 6, but said he felt very comfortable.

As I stood at his bedside, and said to me "You know, they are all different. The common is that they are all snowflake. Thank you for me." I felt just as emotional now, writing this. Prior to



he reached for my hand snowflakes are unique, one thing they have in beautiful. You are my taking such good care of at that moment as I do leaving the PACU, I

called the waiting area to have his family go to his room. They met us there, and both sons hugged and thanked me for taking care of their father.

I walked away thinking of how different the entire episode would have been, had I administered Versed which would have sedated Mr. K and not allowed him to share his life with me. I was thankful for the small part I played in his life and I was also glad that he had a caring family.

Mr. K returned two weeks later for the posterior part of his surgery and I had the pleasure of caring for him a second time. When he saw me, he smiled and said “There is my snowflake....you did not melt!”

Caring for him caused me to reflect on the fact that each Christmas season I decorate our PACU with origami snowflakes I create from paper, and that from now on, I will always remember Mr. K as I sit with paper and scissors in hand.

Perhaps it was divine intervention, or perhaps not, but I believe that I was somehow chosen to be Mr. K’s nurse that day.

