

2011

Clinical Exemplar

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CARING AND COMPASSION, A BOX OF MINTS AND Two HUGS

It was a typical day in the PACU. My first patient was wheeled in after an orthopedic procedure. He was about 19 years old. He was a bit anxious and in some post-op pain as one would expect. I began taking care of him. I talked to him, reassured him, joked a bit and medicated him for pain. As I was preparing to take him to his room he asked if I would write down my name so he could “get me something”. I did write down my name but assured him that it was absolutely not necessary to get me anything. Later that afternoon one of the surgical nurses came into PACU and handed me a box of mints and a thank-you note. The note read “thanks for taking good care of me and being so nice”. I was so touched by this small gift. While the box of mints was small, to me the gesture of appreciation was large. While I thought I had simply done my job, the patient’s perception was different. He truly appreciated the simple compassion and kindness I had shown him.



Now turn the tables around. In November my husband and I were blindsided by one of the most frightening diagnosis ever. My husband had a fairly advanced stage of cancer. We learned this likely diagnosis in a hospital emergency room in St. Thomas. Scared and definitely out of our comfort zone we arrived at the emergency room. The facility appeared dated and the equipment a bit sparse compared to AMC. But the Registered nurses and ER Physician were efficient and knowledgeable. But even more important they were caring and empathetic. Upon the ENT physician's diagnosis of cancer, (we knew not definitive but probable at the time) they seemed genuinely sad for us. Upon leaving the ER two of the nurses gave



us each a hug and wished us well. Even though it did not change the diagnosis or what we would be facing on arrival back home those two hugs were such a comforting gesture.

I think caring and compassion are one of the most, if not the most important thing we have to convey to our patients. Diagnostically we want to have state of the art equipment available for our use to better care for our patients. We absolutely want to be able to cure as much illness as we can through the best medications and the best treatments.

Our patients expect that we have expertise and critical thinking skills and those skills will keep them safe. But to the vulnerable patient facing an illness they also need to see that someone cares. They need to see human compassion. Such a big part of their level of emotional comfort relies on the caring and empathy of the professional nurse and other health care providers.

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We must never forget that behind the monitors, the computers, and the medications that our patients and family members need our human side. So I think of my small box of mints and a thank-you given to me by my patient. I think of the hugs on a late night in an ER far away from home. No matter whether you are the patient or a family member it is the human touch that will be remembered and in the end will be a critical part of the healing process.

