

# **Commentary: Christian nurses helping people in difficult circumstances**

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## **COMMENTARY: Christian nurses helping people in difficult circumstances**

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My mind is crowded with pictures of nurses caring for people in physical and emotional pain .

I remember the Hospice nurse who sang along with me while I sang hymns to my dear friend, Maryanne, the day before she died.

There was the "gentle giant" male nurse who was especially careful with my father-in-law as he spent his last weeks in the oncology unit. He always took time to make sure things were just right. He was always so considerate of Daddy's need. He also shared his faith with me when he noticed I was reading the Bible to Daddy.

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Sarah  
Stone has  
had  
experience  
on both  
sides of a  
Christian  
nursing  
ministry.

I recall the nurse who asked me how I was feeling—how I was really feeling. She sat with me and talked and held my hand after I miscarried my twins (at only seventeen weeks). She told me another nurse had rocked my baby girl as she died, while I was in surgery to stop my hemorrhage. Her twin had been stillborn. After twenty-three years, I still recall the kindness of those nurses.

So I suppose I am qualified to tell how nurses give comfort and care to people who are hurting emotionally, spiritually or physically. I have been on the receiving end; I know how experiences like these prepared me to comfort others, every day. This desire to help other people is what motivated me to enter the nursing profession in the first place. Twenty-eight more years of life experiences have complemented that desire as I have grown in with maturity and empathy. Most nurses come to the profession with at least a vague idea of what nurturing and comforting the sick means. Christian nurses understand our profession is in actuality a calling, a mission, and a viable way of living out our commitment to Christ.

In reflecting on the situations when another nurse comforted me, I think of 2 Corinthians 1:3-6, which says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any

trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.”

As a registered nurse in Day Surgery Recovery, I meet people each day who are in some kind of health crisis. These encounters usually last only a few hours—and not every patient is going through a particularly bad time—but it affords me the opportunity to make an impact on someone else’s life. It may be in word or it may be in deed, but as a nurse, I have this opportunity.

A patient in my recovery room may be in great discomfort, in which case I can offer pain medication early and often, while following doctor’s orders. I can validate his or her pain, because sometimes a person simply needs to hear that someone else believes the pain is real. I try to encourage some of my patients by telling them I can relate to the pain they are experiencing, because I have had a similar experience. I also inform the family about the patient’s condition as soon as possible after surgery, so that they can offer support.

Someone may come out of surgery with a new diagnosis of cancer or other bad news. The best thing I can do for that patient is just listen to him voice his fears or hold his hand for awhile. A gentle touch, hand-to-hand contact, eye-to-eye communication, a soft voice—these are all important tools in sharing the comfort with which I have been comforted. The greatest comfort seems to come from knowing that someone else is sincerely concerned about you when you are hurting.

Sometimes I like to sing quietly as I go about my duties at the bedside. Many patients have commented the hymn I was humming brought them a special peace. Children especially seem comforted by a simple lullaby.

I also pray with my patients. At Hendrick Medical Center we are not only permitted, but encouraged to pray with our patients—if this is acceptable

to them. Hearing someone else pray for you is very comforting. It comforts the patient to know his caregiver looks to a higher power as the source of healing, and it comforts the nurse to know that what she does is truly in God's hands.

Nursing is an art as well as a science. It can also be a ministry. Finesse and intuition are critical elements. But I must remember that every person I encounter in my work is a unique creature of God. Not every patient would appreciate the actions I have described. Some want to keep their guard up, maintaining an emotional distance from other people, especially in areas like mine where stays are very short. Some people are at their absolute worst when sick or in pain; sometimes they are unreasonable or angry. A part of my role is to keep the peace and to determine the best way to relate uniquely to each person.

**"One of the best things I can do for any of my patients is listen to them. Listening enables me to understand and validate their feelings. When I listen to my patients I learn from them how best to help".**

Teamwork is important! I have heard it said that the best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother. Perhaps in a similar way, it may be that one of the best things we nurses can do for our patients is to love and care for each other—or at least have a cooperative attitude. If we support each other and strive to make our workplace atmosphere pleasant,

it will be much easier for our patients to get through their hospital ordeal.

It also is important to remember we serve with a team. Even in Day Surgery, chaplains' visits or social worker interviews assist our efforts. Whenever possible we include the family in this team; keeping them informed when they cannot physically be with the patient.

I must admit that even though I strive to be a wonderful, sweet, kind, caring, nurturing, compassionate, helpful, gentle nurse, I do not always achieve my goal or carry it out flawlessly every day! I am human! I have bad days, but I have learned the importance of courtesy and kindness—even when I do not feel like being courteous or kind. This is the essence of professionalism. Patients should receive kindness even when I am not necessarily feeling kind on the inside.

Philip Yancey says it's much easier to act your way into feelings than to feel your way into actions. Sometimes nurses have to be actors! I may go home frustrated enough to kick my dog, but while I am on the job, I want my patients to think I had nothing to do but to pamper them. I also want to convey to them my sincerity in my caring for them, regardless of what just happened at our unit staff meeting!

By and large, nurses today have less time for dispensing TLC (tender loving care) than we have had in decades past. The amount of paperwork required today absorbs so much of our time. But if we are going to help people get through their tough times—whatever those times may be for them—then we have to find the time for each patient.

If I am hurried or behind in my paperwork, I try to keep my patients from seeing this in my face or in my actions. A patient is in a vulnerable position. He or she is dependent on me in so many ways. So each one wants my undivided attention, and not hear how busy I am. Every patient has the right to think he is the most important person on my unit. If a patient

believes he has my undivided attention and I am truly concerned with every aspect of his care, it will help him get through his tough time. If I can sit calmly at a patient's bedside, even for a moment, make eye contact, and be gentle in my touch—even if my mind is on ten other tasks that I have to finish in the next five minutes—the patient will sense I truly care.

One of the best things I can do for any of my patients is listen to them. Listening enables me to understand and validate their feelings. When I listen to my patients I learn from them how best to help.

Christ commands us to live out our faith in daily living. That is true for everyone in every vocation, but nurses have a unique opportunity to serve people who are in some of the most vulnerable or critical moments in their lives.

The Hendrick mission statement says that we will strive “to provide high quality health services, emphasizing excellence and Christian service in all we do”. I have heard many patients say they choose us, because they sense that the people who work here really care. I am sure this is largely because so many of us are professing Christians, and we instinctively try to live out this mission.

Nurses will always be on the frontline in providing compassionate care. It is not easy to do consistently when dealing with the varieties of people we encounter every day, but I believe God uses us and works through us. In the power of his Spirit - the fruits of patience - kindness and gentleness can become expressions of our work, as much as they are descriptions of Christian character. May God grant that it always be this way.

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