

“Caring for the person with cancer – a positive nursing experience”

I have worked as an oncology nurse for over eight years and I cannot imagine a more rewarding and enjoyable area to work in. It is a personable style of nursing, sharing intimate moments with patients and their significant others. It is a real privilege to offer support and understanding, pain management, self help strategies and symptom control.

Since working in oncology, I believe many of us assume we have more time than we really do. We don't appreciate the small things in life that matter so much to us when one thing in life we cannot buy runs out. ...time!

I have many “moments in time” to reflect upon no doubt many more to look forward too. Some of them have been incredibly funny and some heartbreakingly sad, but I think I am privileged to have been in a position that allows me to not only give, the best nursing care I can offer, but to also receive, the most heartfelt and sincere appreciation, that someone else can offer.

Oncology nursing is about being available in “their time”, not your time. An example of this is a palliative patient who has just finished showering and you have helped them to dry themselves and halfway between singlet and socks they want to share the struggles they have in losing the ability to maintain their activities of daily living. They then go on to discuss the real essence and greater implications of a loss of independence and being in control of their own life. The mind may be willing but the body is not. This can often be attributed to pain, fatigue, nausea or loss of concentration and the disease process.

One of the funnier moments I can remember, is helping a palliative patient plan his funeral and his mates fulfilling his wishes. He was a true larrikin who wanted his mates to sit at his bedside sharing stubbies of beer and a few stories during his final moments and to give him a guard of honour with stubbies upheld as his body was lifted into the funeral van. He subsequently got his wish to be buried with a carton of beer, a carton of cigarettes and the band playing “Return to Sender”. Apparently there was not a dry eye as his friends and loved ones waved him goodbye.

Difficult moments like the gorgeous young man I will call Leo, the same age as my son, who was diagnosed with glioblastoma. He died the same night he should have been attending his high school leaver's dinner. The same night my son attended his. This transference impacted upon me greatly and became a pivotal moment in my nursing journey.

A wonderful young couple I will call Jack and Jill, he is a tall strong good-looking man and Jill looks more like a fashion model than a woman struggling with aggressive breast cancer. I knew them for less than a year and watched and waited as they fought every day to beat a cancer that had already metastasised into her bones when she was first diagnosed. In the beginning Jill walked in to have her outpatient appointments and chemotherapy treatments but towards the end Jack wheeled her in, lifted her up with his strong arms from the wheelchair and gently placed her 46kg

fragile frame into the chemotherapy chair, carefully placing a heat pack behind her back to help alleviate the dense bone pain she experienced daily.

Her long glossy black hair fell out as she continued with treatment, but Jill never lost the well groomed look of a model. Maintaining such dignity and grace, with her softly spoken words to request help with keeping up her nutrition status or trying to find food she could tolerate in a desperate bid to maintain weight and life.

They lived from appointment to appointment as many oncology patients do between outpatients, chemotherapy, radiation, dieticians, dentists, general practitioners and counsellors. A time consuming stream of waiting rooms, prescriptions, treatments, parking cars and in their case juggling three small children with school runs, kindergarten drop offs, dance lessons and homework.

Time

Jack was always grateful when Jill had her pre-medication of Phenergan prior to chemotherapy treatments because she would sleep soundly for four hours and allow him some precious time to walk outside alone with his thoughts, grabbing some special moments for himself without being the carer, the husband, the dad, the decision maker, the shopper, the taxi driver and the list goes on.

Time

Jill liked the Phenergan too! It removed her from the constant reminder she was fighting cancer every day that she would leave behind a wonderful husband, three beautiful children and a life she desperately wanted to live.

Time

How do I find this sort of nursing rewarding, a privilege, and a pleasure? Because it is the small things you do that make a small difference to Jack and Jill which make a big difference when you add them all together to give them a better quality of life. Maybe it is just a friendly familiar face to greet you, a smile, a touch or an understanding ear to listen and validate your thoughts and feelings offered with a high standard of nursing care that instils a confidence in your patient.

It may be as simple as making an earlier appointment, a nutritional drink supplement she can keep down, improved pain relief that allows them both to sleep, aperients that relieve constipation from the increased codeine, education in slow release and immediate release medications for better pain management, having a bed ready with the heat pack when they arrive. These are the small things that add up to big differences in quality of life when you can't offer quantity.

Time.....

Jill made Christmas with Jack and their children and she saw the New Year in as she and Jack spoke of all the things they wished for and knew they wouldn't get and all the hard things too, the things Jill wouldn't share or see but wished for all the same.

Time

It may be that as a nurse you have contacted family members in time to be there when their loved one dies, or held their hand when they have cried, or laughed with them over the stupid human aspects of ourselves. I remember a 70 year old lady I will call Del, who collapsed to the ground walking along the ward corridor. Del was playing "possum" because known to most of us she said she wanted to see, "What you would do if I really died!". Del also requested her niece stick her with a pin before the undertakers collected her body to make sure she was really dead! Del spoke openly about her fear of being buried alive.

You die once. Wouldn't it be wonderful if everyone died surrounded by people who loved them, understood them and having no regrets? Wouldn't it be wonderful if everyone died with dignity and without suffering? I can say that Leo, Del, Jill and our aussie larrikin died being loved, understood, accepted and with dignity. To die with no regrets or suffering is a tall order when your seventeen years old or a mother of three or simply want to live. Since working in the oncology sphere I wrote my own epitaph, "Don't say yes when you mean no and don't say no when you really want to say yes!" I try to live by this rule as much as I can because I have been inspired by some very special people to appreciate something valuable we cannot buytime.