PERSONAL REFLECTION

How being a tea-cart volunteer changed the way I see cancer patients and influenced my nursing practice

by Sarah Jane Quinn

Often when I tell people I volunteer at a cancer centre I get the response that most oncology nurses receive, “Isn’t that hard? And sad? Why do you volunteer there?” However, after two years of being a tea-cart volunteer, I have found that the main emotion expressed by both myself and the patients in our interactions is pure excitement over, yes, tea and cookies. When I started volunteering after my first year of nursing school, my volunteer hours piled up before my clinical hours. Therefore, volunteering was my first real interaction with cancer patients in the treatment setting.

As a tea-cart volunteer I serve refreshments to patients and their families in chemotherapy, radiation, and on an acute intensive palliative care unit. In a single shift, I have watched as patients ring the bell on their last day of treatment, and I have held the hand of a man who was crying as his loved one lay in the bed beside him in palliative care. I meet cancer patients of all ages, and in all different stages of their disease. The common theme among nearly all people with cancer whom I have met in my time as a volunteer is an unwavering gratefulness. I receive countless thank-yous from patients for what my team and I do. Often, I have heard, “We’ve been waiting for you!” or, “I am so happy to see you!” as I come around the corner with my tea cart. (No wonder I love volunteering so much!). Being a tea-cart volunteer has taught me that cancer patients are some of the most appreciative people I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. All of my co-volunteers, who do not work in the medical field, have expressed the same amazement in regards to the patients, as well.

Thanks to the tea-cart volunteering, all my preconceived assumptions about oncology being a constantly depressing setting have been proven wrong. Even though I get to meet many different cancer patients, what makes the interaction between me and the patients so unique is the absence of knowledge I have about their cancer. I don’t know what type of cancer they have, how long they have had cancer, what chemotherapy drug is hanging in the bag above them, or what their prognosis is. I feel that is the true magic of the tea-cart exchange, we can offer patients a break from their often anxiety-provoking appointments and offer them a warm cup of tea and a conversation that is as much about cancer as the patient dictates.

While talking to patients, I am also pleasantly surprised by how open they are about any topic. I soon came to realize that their openness is what makes our conversations so genuine. The patients always seem to show an interest in us, as volunteers, asking us what we are doing in school or where we work, or why we started volunteering. Prior to volunteering I feared saying the wrong thing, or offending them considering what they are going through. However, through my time volunteering, I have learned that oncology patients are some of the easiest people to talk to. I know without a doubt that my time with the tea cart will someday make me a better oncology nurse, since I have witnessed all the good qualities that oncology patients share so readily.

The greatest lesson from volunteering that I have transferred to my student nursing practice is that taking an extra moment to provide a patient with the most basic care can be what alters a patient’s experience for the better. All those seemingly small ways to provide care that all nurses learn in our first nursing course—such as taking the time for conversation, offering something to drink, wrapping someone in a warm blanket—are what I, as a volunteer, solely focus on. Seeing the difference this makes in my volunteer role, I make a more conscious effort to incorporate it into my nursing practice. As a student nurse, the ability to take a step back and focus on these small, yet significant, aspects of care has not always been easy, as I am often overwhelmed with the stress of time management. Yet, when I do take the time in my craziest days to grab my patient that piece of peanut butter toast or ask about their life and genuinely listen to their response, I leave the unit feeling like I am shaping into the type of nurse I aspire to be. Volunteering has reminded me why I chose this profession—to care for others in whatever way I can.

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