



One nurse's day. One patient's last day. A personal reflection.

Each day, as I walk unto our COVID-19 units, I am faced with the reality of all we are experiencing, at this time in our lives. I am reminded of the bravery of our staff; who are leaving their loved ones at home and putting all their anxiety and fears aside, to be present and available to care for our members. I honor them because I realize they are here because they want to be here. They are here, when many of their peers have given in to their fears and, as a result, are not available to care for our members.

Unfortunately, this has become our reality. I am also reminded of the reality of our current experiences, when I see the numerous members who are affected by COVID-19. With heaviness in my heart, I see the fear in their eyes and hear the uncertainty in their voices, as they try to comprehend their diagnoses and what lays ahead.

In contemplating these last few weeks, I reflect on the patients who have shown up at our hospital doors, extremely ill, many of whom were admitted to the ICU and placed on vents, almost immediately. Others who were stable upon arrival, but soon had to be intubated and upgraded to critical status. And then there are those who have succumbed to their COVID-19 disease.

As I walked through the unit, I paused at each window and looked into each patient's room. I wanted to connect with each of them, somehow, and let them know they weren't alone. Many of them looked up. I smiled and waved. They would wave back. I would place my hand on my heart as a gesture, letting them know that my heart was with them. Some of them did the same or put two hands together, in a gesture of prayer. I nodded and moved on.

One of these patients stands out in my mind. When I got to her room, I saw that she was very ill. She looked sweaty, had on a nonrebreather mask, and her eyes were closed. I watched her chest rise and fall and began to count her respirations ...1....2...3... When she inhaled, the breaths were very deep. There were long pauses in between breaths and moments of apnea. I could see that she was struggling. As a nurse who had seen this pattern of breathing before, I could see that she was dying. I called the nurse over and she confirmed that the patient was a DNR; on comfort measures. My heart was very heavy, as I watched from the hallway.

I was saddened by the fact that this was happening to her. I was also saddened by the fact that the patient was all alone; no staff and no family/friends were in the room. She was by herself. In my heart I knew that no one should die alone. No one. The nurse informed me that a family member was on the way. I didn't know how long it would take the family to arrive and I didn't want her to experience the end of her life, alone.

So, I opened the isolation cart and began to pull out PPE. Another nurse came over to me and asked what I was doing. I responded that I was going in the room. The nurse said, "She's dying". I responded that I was aware of that.

I continued to don my PPE and entered the room. Once inside, I pulled up the chair and took hold of the patient's hand. I began speaking to her, telling who I was and that although she didn't know me, I cared about her and she was not alone. I continued speaking with her, as I rubbed her arm and brushed the hair from her face.

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Because I am a nurse.

For some reason, I felt that she was listening to me; that she could hear me...for at times, her breathing and body seemed to become more relaxed and calmer; as if she was being reassured by my words. At least, that was my hope. I sat with her for an hour or so; leaving only for a quick meeting.

Over the next couple of hours, I returned to the unit to watch her through the window or check on her by calling the charge nurse. Prior to returning to the unit, for the last time, I called the charge nurse to let her know I was on my way back and was told that the patient had passed away.

Thankfully, the family member had arrived. However, when I went to speak with the family member, I saw her standing outside of the room. She had not gone inside. This may have been due to the anxiety and fears surrounding COVID-19. I went back to my office, closed the door and cried.

As a nursing director, I know that I have to put on a strong and reassuring face, whenever I enter the building. This is especially true right now. Amid all this fear and uncertainty, I have to be without cracks or weak spots. That is, I know my staff and peers need to see strength in me. I have had to remain focused on meeting the demands of this coronavirus pandemic.

But this is very difficult to do, at times. I have cried many tears and said many prayers. I have cried for all the illness and loss. I have cried because I couldn't give the staff what they wanted or needed. I cried because our lives have been turned upside down. And, I have cried for myself; because I have to go through this. Because I have no choice. I am a nurse.

As a woman of faith, I believe I am here, in this place, for a reason. God knew I would be right here, right now, doing what I am doing—in the midst of this COVID-19 pandemic. I pray I am making Him proud. I am thankful for being a nurse and for being part of the Kaiser Permanente family.

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