Making a Lasting Impression

Nurse Recalls a Most Amazing, Gentle Woman

Cindy Hansard, RN, OCN®

Patients affect our lives in many ways. In my case it was Katherine, a gentle, caring, and amazing lady who touched the hearts of all those who cared for her. It’s hard to remember the first day I met Katherine; it seemed as though she had always been a part of my life. Her son always attended clinic and chemotherapy sessions with her. Unfortunately, her malignancy required frequent chemotherapy treatments and often daily visits for an extended period of time. All of the chemotherapy nurses became very close to Katherine and her son. They soon became our friends and felt like family.

Katherine had a way of picking up on concerns that were important or troublesome to each of us in our lives without us even realizing she had done so. We treated her for several months but, as her disease became less responsive and she became weaker, the visits were more difficult for her to manage. During the last week of her life, she asked each of us (the nurses in the chemotherapy hut) one at a time to sit and talk with her. She offered us advice, concern, and hope for the goals and problems that we were experiencing in our lives. She was like a grandmother that anyone would be lucky to have. I was so touched and, at the same time, found myself wondering when she began to take care of us?

Katherine’s condition continued to deteriorate. Her last visit with us is one that will always remain in my heart. Her son was very teary and emotional as they arrived to the unit that morning. He knew that his mother’s life was nearing an end. He was concerned about her ability to care for herself at home, but she did not want to be admitted to the hospital. Katherine wanted to be in outpatient chemotherapy where she had been for so long. She felt safe, comfortable, and loved by her physician, all the staff, and the chemotherapy nurses. Katherine did appear weaker that morning, but was alert and responsive.

I do believe that she knew and chose for this to be her last stop. I did not realize this immediately but, retrospectively, I feel that Katherine did. Her condition changed very rapidly that morning. Within minutes of her arrival she became less responsive, developed difficulty breathing, and experienced vital sign changes. The change in her condition was very dramatic and somewhat unexpected. The next few minutes can only be described as a very holy or spiritual experience. Katherine had a peace and readiness on her face, which is difficult to describe, but was obvious to all in the room. Suddenly, the tension and struggling were gone. She still was talking just moments before her death, but she no longer seemed to be speaking with us. She was happy and at peace.

Katherine’s death was peaceful. It was an incredible feeling when our patients come back to see us and say “It’s been 5 or 10 years now,” and many times even longer. It’s always exciting to see them again and listen as they share what is new in their lives. Certainly, it is not

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Oncology nursing is about this very story. Throughout the years, there have been so many special people that I have had the privilege to know. It’s such an incredible feeling when our patients come back to see us and say “It’s been 5 or 10 years now,” and many times even longer. It’s always exciting to see them again and listen as they share what is new in their lives. Certainly, it is not
about death and dying. It’s about the relationships and bonds that make oncology such an amazing area to work. Our patients and families face many challenges and life changes. If we, as a team, can help them with these issues and concerns, helping to make it easier and less frightening, then we have done a good job. This area of nursing is very rewarding. We are truly blessed by all the amazing people that become a part of our lives. And, I like to believe we helped Katherine and her family as much as she helped each of us.

First Patient With Cancer Teaches That Life Is a Gift
Sandra K. Shelton, RN, OCN®

The first patient with cancer who I had the privilege of caring for was a very special lady. I was there when she went into the physician for the initial check of a small lump she had found in her left breast. She left with instructions to just watch it for a few weeks and that it was probably nothing. I was there when she returned five weeks later to let the doctor know it was growing and beginning to feel very tender. And, I was there when she went for the biopsy and returned to be told that her lump was malignant.

There were tears and thoughts of, “What now?” and all the questions a patient with breast cancer has: Will I lose my breast, will my hair fall out, will I be really sick, can I still play with my grandchildren, am I going to die? And my question—why do such good people have to deal with cancer?

My patient was a loving wife, mother, sister, and friend to many people. I often hear about touching someone’s life, and Bonnie certainly touched mine more than she will ever know. She allowed me to be a part of her care. Bonnie never really dreaded her chemotherapy, always telling everyone how nice the nurses were and how they made her treatment easier for her with their humor and kindness. Her biggest concerns pertained to her loss of control. Bonnie was old fashioned, and no one cleaned her house, cooked her meals, or took care of her family like she did! She had to be convinced that all of this assistance was very temporary and that the people in her life were just giving back to her as much as she had given to them.

Bonnie was one of those people who always made the nurses and doctors feel very special. She never complained about her chemotherapy or her radiation. Although the staff knew these were very trying times for her, she was the one who always made us feel better. Bonnie was sure that no matter what God had in store, she would be fine. Following the completion of her chemotherapy and radiation, everything went back to normal for Bonnie, and all was well with the world one more time. Bonnie never took anything for granted and lived like every day was a gift.

However, seven years later, Bonnie’s oncologist diagnosed her with metastatic disease to the bone. I was there with her and there were more appropriate tears. Bonnie’s life would be changed forever at this point—more treatment, more sickness. The oncologist cried with her.

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Bonnie taught me compassion, understanding, and what it meant to really touch someone’s life in a very special way. She just loved, never expecting anything in return. I want to be more like her. She is why I am an oncology nurse today. She is why I find no difficulty in loving and reaching out to my patients. I can only hope that I can be half the amazing woman she was.

I remember getting the phone call from my family the day she was admitted to the intensive care unit with multi-system failure. I was able to go see her for what would be the last time. You see, we were both from families of eight children. Bonnie was next to the oldest child, I fell next to the baby. And Bonnie was a patient I never started an IV on, I never accessed her port, and I never even administered her chemotherapy; but she was my sister, my best friend, my teacher, and my mentor. She taught me so much about cancer care—the side of it that involves more than drugs. She is my motivation every day to be a better person and a better nurse. What an honor to be a part of her care. She taught me how to touch lives. I hope I can make her proud.

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