Lifelong Impression

Remembering one of our own during the holiday season

Mai-Fung Ho-Law, MSN, RN, OCN

In life, meeting someone who truly possesses the gift of teaching is a blessing. As an exceptional mentor and role model, this person will inspire us to be the best that we can be and make us want to be better human beings. As oncology nurses, we have the honor of caring for patients who have been devastated by the diagnosis of cancer. Establishing deep connections with some of these patients will enrich and give more meaning to our own lives.

AT A GLANCE
- A holistic approach is integral in helping to focus the mind so that patients with cancer can have better control of their emotional state, thereby improving their physical health.
- Healthcare professionals must develop the skill of active listening with empathy when engaging with their patients; this helps validate patients’ emotions and perceptions during their cancer diagnosis and treatment and at the end of life.
- A cancer diagnosis triggers a wide range of emotions, and, oftentimes, they all can occur simultaneously.

Each upcoming winter poses the laborious task of decorating the house for the holiday season. It starts with lugging all the boxes filled with decorations from the basement to the first floor and ends with the joyful reward of a feast for one’s eyes after transforming the house into a winter wonderland.

One decoration of mine that is packed and unpacked with exceptional care is a beautiful porcelain snowman music box. This music box is one of my most treasured gifts because it was given to me by a patient I took care of more than 20 years ago. Each time I look at this special gift during the holiday season, I feel a sensation of warmth in my heart. It always triggers a flood of memories as I take a moment to remember a patient that left a lifelong impression on me, personally and professionally.

As a brand new graduate, completely naïve, I was so excited and anxious to embark on my professional journey. I remember as clear as day walking through the front door of a prestigious hospital to begin my nursing career.

After completing all the required general orientation classes, I met one nursing instructor, Pat, who made an indelible impression. Pat always had the most comprehensible explanations and the ability to connect and easily engage with people. She made learning fun and kept us interested every day. She possessed the quality of being able to effect bonding experiences between herself and the orientees. Because of Pat’s teaching ability, this created a positive learning experience and provided me with confidence. This instructor was committed to the nursing profession. I looked up to her for her endless patience, kindness, and support. I saw Pat as a role model for a nursing educator I’d like to become one day. Four years later, I became an oncology nurse.

One summer morning when I came into work, I was in shock. I looked at the list of patients scheduled for that day. I saw Pat’s name and thought, “Please don’t let this be her. Please let it be someone else with the same name.” Unfortunately, it was her, and she had been diagnosed with stage IV ovarian cancer. She was on leave from work to get cancer treatment.

I was so upset for her and nervous to take care of my mentor as a patient, which is different from how I had felt before taking care of other patients. It felt so unfair that Pat was sitting in that treatment chair. Somehow, she put me at ease knowing it was difficult for me to be her nurse. Eventually, I relaxed and performed the patient education that was needed for a first-time patient receiving chemotherapy. I had received the privilege of taking care of my instructor. In an odd way, I felt I was giving back for all the kindness and support she had given me.

Pat was normally robust in size, active, had tremendous mental and spiritual strength, and possessed a true presence that you could still feel even after she left the room. She was not about to let a thing like cancer drag her down. Pat
went through her treatments like the true champion she was. She dealt with her alopecia with a sense of humor. There was nothing I would not do for this woman, and I wished I could do more. During the holiday season of her treatments, Pat gave me the snowman music box as a gift of appreciation.

In the course of the following year, the disease overtook Pat, and she began to physically deteriorate. During the last few months, it was difficult to watch her health fail, her weight decrease, and her spirit weaken, yet to watch her still try to fight with whatever she had left. Pat’s oncologist was one with whom I had a strong rapport, and he understood my background with Pat. One day, he told me that she was admitted and doing poorly. This was the moment I dreaded would come.

During Pat’s last hospital admission, I went to visit her in her private room. I stood outside her door not wanting to go in, not knowing how to prepare myself for what I would see and for how she looked now. I was desperate for any courage and took a deep breath before walking in. Pat was alone in the room and appeared so small lying there that the bed seemed to envelop her. She was weak and could barely speak. Her mental lucidity was intermittent. I tried my best to talk to her, but deep down inside my heart was breaking. I held her hand and told her to let me know if she needed me to do anything for her. It was difficult to ascertain if she heard or understood what I was saying to her. Pat looked at me with eyes that appeared unfocused and did not respond back to me. She was dying. I had to brace myself to stop from crying in front of her. She was not just a patient to me. She was my mentor, colleague, and friend.

I sat for a while holding her hand. I hoped she at least knew she had someone there for her, someone who respected her and looked up to her so much. I thanked her for all she taught me and for being such an inspirational role model for me, not just as a nurse but as a human being. I ended my visit by asking her if she needed anything, knowing she would never ask for anything again and that that would be the last time I would see her. I did not want to say goodbye, but this was our final goodbye. I finally mustered up the strength to leave her, and once I was outside her room, all my emotions and tears that were choked up in my throat let loose. Pat’s oncologist happened to be approaching her room at that time. I was unable to look at him and could not even speak. No words were necessary as he took one look at me in my grief. He understood exactly my history with Pat and how close my relationship with her had become during her cancer journey. As I sobbed, he held me in comfort. Our nursing profession was about to suffer an enormous loss. The pain of feeling powerless to death was indescribable.

As nurses, we have the honor of meeting and caring for countless patients. We develop deep connections with some who wind up enriching our own lives while sharing their cancer journeys with us. They put their lives in our hands and inspire us as shining examples of nurses and mentors.

Each time I look at the music box and listen to the “Frosty the Snowman” tune, I think of Pat and the wonderful woman she was. My connection with her had truly run the spectrum of a professional relationship. We had evolved from novice and expert to student and mentor to peer and colleague and, lastly, to nurse and patient. I reflect on how much she meant to me professionally and personally. I remember, with gratitude, how instrumental she was as my role model in forming me into the nurse that I became. I am the nurse I am today because of her. There are no words to describe how priceless her influence has been to me and many others.

Pat, my mentor, I hope I did you proud.

Mai-Fung Ho-Law, MSN, RN, OCN®, is an infusion oncology RN in the John Theurer Cancer Center at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey. Ho-Law can be reached at mai-fung.ho-law@hackensackmeridian.org, with copy to CJONEditor@ons.org.

The author takes full responsibility for this content and did not receive honoraria or disclose any relevant financial relationships.