Pricks of Conscience

A needle-phobic patient’s experience of compassionate nursing care

Charles Roussel, MBA, BS

My wife is wildly needle-phobic. We are not talking about the “turn your head away and think of the beach” kind of phobia. We are talking the entire vasovagal value pack: intense anxiety, lightheadedness, sweating, rapid heartbeat, and elevated blood pressure. 1, 2, 3 . . . down for the count.

To grossly understate things, this makes cancer treatment complicated, particularly with two different cancer diagnoses in two years. We have been at this now for a decade, and it is not an exaggeration to say that my wife would not be alive today were it not for the care teams who have managed all the little (and big) pricks in her life.

Her primary, rare cancer was not initially treatable through oral chemotherapy, so subcutaneous injection, IV cannulation, and intramuscular injection were an inevitable part of her treatment plan. When it became clear that no cure was possible and that these procedures would be part of a regimen she would need to follow for the rest of her life, she almost walked away. And had it not been for a particularly gifted, deeply humane, and wickedly funny oncology nurse, Carolann, who has been treating her for many years now, I believe she would have. Carolann’s skills and compassion have made all the difference, one that I will describe shortly.

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To put her needle phobia into perspective, my wife is otherwise fearless and infectiously optimistic. A few weeks after a second, grueling liver resection, she showed up in her surgical oncologist’s office having used eyeliner to draw a circle around her wishbone-shaped abdominal scar. While she lifted her blouse with one hand to reveal the peace sign, she formed a “V” with the other, saying, “Once a flower child, always a flower child.” I fell off my chair just in time to catch her surgeon, who was convulsed in laughter.

When we spent a year traveling back and forth to Sweden for peptide receptor radionuclide therapy for her cancer, which then was not available in the United States, she made friends with the Transportation Security Administration agents at Logan International Airport in Boston, Massachusetts, who were required to routinely poke and prod her on our return trips home. This was humbling to watch. Each time we passed through customs, her radiation levels set off the dirty bomb protocols. This shut down all the immigration lines. Visualize red lights flashing and armed agents approaching. We would be separated and escorted to tiny cinder block-walled rooms, each with a small metal toilet, over which hung a broadly beaming picture of Barack Obama. There we would sit for hours until “Washington” found her isotope on the approved list of medical radiologics.

Upon our release, as I invariably groused about inconvenience and indignity and tried to find our abandoned luggage, I usually found my wife trading shoe-shopping

AT A GLANCE

- My wife’s nursing team has brought personal presence—listening skills, authenticity, awareness, and compassion—to every clinical encounter, helping transform even the most difficult care situations into life-affirming experiences.
- This very personal and personalized care approach has enabled us to maintain a sense of control in the face of uncertainty, taking away the dread and bringing greater peace of mind.
- Because of this kindhearted care, my wife has found renewed strength and an enhanced capacity to reach out to her fellow patients and ease their burdens.

KEYWORDS
cancer care; oncology nurse; compassion; cancer treatment; nurse–patient relationship

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An oncology nurse’s warmth, humor, and compassionate care have helped even the odds in my wife’s decade-long battle with incurable cancer. Needle phobia and a complex chemotherapy regimen have made for a challenging course of treatment. However, working closely with us, my wife’s care team has given us back the control that can so easily ebb with remission and relapse.
tips with the head of security, a lady with whom she shared a passion for discounted Jimmy Choos. Humbling (and expensive, but I digress).

Over time, at the half dozen cancer centers where my wife was treated with close to a dozen procedures, the weekly blood draws and the IV lines got easier. She willed this to happen. I am convinced that this was because she did not want to inconvenience the phlebotomists and nurses who were helping her—the people whose children’s names she had come to know, whose vacation pictures she had shared, and whose confidences she had kept.

You get the picture. Tough lady. Wonder Woman tough. Except for that one thing that gets under her skin. The big needles still bring on the big terror.

This is the difference that Carolann has made: she has let my wife remain herself—the funny, formidable fashionista who is not defined by her illness, not overcome by her fears. Through empathy and kindness, warmth and deep solicitude, she has eased Wonder Woman’s terror, taken away the dread, and given her back the control that can so easily ebb with the tides of remission and relapse. What an incredible gift of personal presence. As if that were not enough, the gift has come beautifully wrapped.

Most visits start with a smiling hug in the waiting room before the treatment begins. Commiseration follows about the early hour and the worsening traffic. Making their way through the infusion unit, they manage a quick catch-up on life’s events, laughing all the way. Once we are settled, there is always abundant patience as Carolann confirms that the topical numbing spray is readily available and will be used. As we sit for a while, letting the benzodiazepines kick in, frequent check-ins are made to ensure comfort. When it is time for the deed, the needle is carefully shielded from view; the only visible injections are humorous ones. And through the privacy curtain closed protectively around her, I can hear my wife laughing. Things usually end with a few whispered questions to the concerned husband about how things are really going.

Even on the busiest day, even when all the chairs and beds in the infusion unit have been filled, even when half the oncology nursing staff is home with the flu, we have never been made to feel like a burden. At a time when humanity in medicine often is dosed in 15-minute increments, this is nothing short of remarkable.

This beautiful gift of Carolann’s presence has made the drugs my wife has been relying on for her peace of mind much less important, because a deeper comfort and peace come from the gentle ministrations of a compassionate caregiver.

I should add that this has happened just in time.

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It turns out that my wife’s reaction to a cocktail of antianxiety and antipain medication is to give away her possessions and steal others. Cue the sequel: Wonder Woman Behind Bars!

I left the infusion unit one day to get coffee and returned to find that after Carolann had complimented her, my wife had started taking off her clothes and giving them to her. Returning from another caffeine jag, I found her stuffing sterile gloves from a dispenser on the wall into her coat pockets because they matched a scarf she was wearing. The next day, I did my best to explain why these gloves could not be returned and why an in-person mea culpa during her next visit would probably suffice.

The effects of Carolann’s compassion have spread as my wife has become determined to pass along to others the kindness shown to her.

Wonder Woman now makes it a point to walk up to a perfect stranger and tell her how nice she looks. It is a genuine gesture that never fails to produce the intended result—a blush, a smile, a “thank you,” a hug. In the space of a few moments, an unexpected connection is made in the shared isolation of illness and, for two people, the day is transformed.

Men and women respond to this equally well. Americans in all parts of the country soften and smile. Allegedly icy Swedes in the grimacing cold of a January morning demur and embrace. It is life-affirming to behold, and it often chokes me up. Such are the continuing gifts of grace.

Thank you, Carolann, for sharing the beneficent power of your disarming smile, the gentle genius of your kind words, and the instinctive compassion of an even kinder heart.

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