A Renewed Call to Compassion

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Hospitals are busy, often chaotic places with myriad requirements which take up nursing time - attending committee meetings, renewing certifications, making rounds, and providing care. Hospitals are places in which providing patient care is expected, but not necessarily caring. Nursing care has come to have two meanings. The first meaning, to provide the care needed for the patient to achieve optimal health includes the various duties a nurse performs throughout the day such as monitoring vital signs, assessing pain, assuring patient safety, administering medications, and collaborating with others on the healthcare team. The second meaning is to care for the patient in a way that acknowledges their humanity, to be concerned, and to demonstrate compassion. Nurses are often faced with the dichotomy of the expectation of doing of care as outlined in the first meaning and the being or a caregiver in the second. A central act in the being of a caregiver is to act compassionately.

To understand many concepts, it is often helpful to understand what they are not. Compassion is not sympathy. Sympathy is feeling sorry for another, but in a dispassionate way. It is, in fact, saying "That person is hurt -- How sad" without the personal experience of the hurt--of not "hurting with" that person. Sympathy does not impact either the patient's story becomes part of her own, the caregiver set aside their own agenda of providing care and be with someone who is suffering. In compassion, the nurse will stop, make eye contact, and acknowledge the humanity of the patient in their care - not as someone with a disease process, but as someone who is in disease. Compassion compels the nurse to elicit the patient's story and to deeply listen to it, to bear witness to their human needs. Arthur Frank, in his artfully written book, At the Will of the Body: Reflections on Illness, identifies the life affirming nature of this central act of compassion for both the caregiver and the one experiencing care:

[To listen]...makes the person’s life meaningful. And as that person’s life story becomes part of her own, the caregiver’s life is made meaningful as well...Listening to another, we hear ourselves (p. 48) [1].

It is important to nurses to realize the vulnerability of the persons in our care. When we act compassionately, the person is supported and enters into a trusting relationship with the nurse. When we are dispassionate, it is sensed by the patient and a trusting relationship isn’t possible. Again, Arthur Frank illuminates the effect of dispassionate care:

A nurse interviewed...me to assess “psychosocial needs” in the middle of this medical “bus station”. Was I experiencing difficulty at work because of my illness? Reasonable ques-

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Compassion is the central act of caring. Let us all apprehend the vulnerability of those within our care and the need to act compassionately.

References