

Previous patient stories shared in this forum have focused on the impact we have made for one of our patients. This story is as much about the impact we had on this patient as it is about the impact he had on us.

Recently as myself and some of my unit director colleagues have been interviewing nursing students for summer nurse intern positions, a student asked the question: “How do nurses avoid getting burned out?” As I considered his question, I responded that it was not uncommon or unusual for nurses to experience a sense of mental or emotional fatigue as we go about caring for our often very sick patients. Although we empathize with our patients and provide them with care and compassion, we also maintain a certain professional distance to avoid becoming too intensely involved in their particular situation. But I also told him that at some point we all meet a patient who will impact us very deeply. We don’t know what patient it will be, what they will say or do that affects us, or when it will happen. But when it does, it serves to re-energize and motivate us. It is a reminder of why we became nurses and of the important role we play in our patients lives.

This is the story of one such patient. For those of you who are not familiar with the Surgical ICU, we care for mostly surgical oncology patients. Many have cancers that currently do not have a cure. They come to us for surgeries that are primarily palliative. By this I mean that the surgery will help to relieve their pain or other cancer related symptoms but perhaps most importantly, it will provide them with more time: time to hope that a cure will be found and time to spend with those they love. For someone in their 30s and 40s, as is often the case with our patients, this time is precious.

This is the story of Matthew. He was diagnosed with cancer when he was 39 years old. Over the last two years he has undergone several courses of treatment and felt he was beating his cancer.

Then, unexpectedly, a surveillance CT scan showed that his cancer had recurred and had spread to other organs. He underwent another round of chemotherapy but did not respond. His tumors continued to grow. Matt's final option was major abdominal surgery.

He and his wife Mara, who is a nurse, were devastated at this news. As they prepared for Matt's surgery, he made the decision that he wanted those who would be caring for him to know who he was and why he was fighting so hard to beat his cancer.

Matt chose to send a card to us prior to his surgery. He did not know who to address the card to so he sent it to the hospital ATTN: ICU Nurses. The card arrived the morning of his surgery. Not knowing which ICU it was intended for, his card was sent to several units before a nurse recognized he was a SICU patient and brought it to Amber.

Expecting this to be a thank you card that we are accustomed to receiving from patients after they have left our unit, Amber opened it. But this card was different. Inside were two pictures and a heartfelt note. We would like to share his words with you.

*I'm writing in advance to thank you for taking care of me during my stay. My name is Matt and I'll be staying with you on Tuesday and a few days after that. Thank you for the many years of schooling you went through so you can take care of people like me.*

*I'm enclosing a picture of me and my wife, Mara, so you know who we are before we get there.*

*I'm also enclosing a picture of a sonogram of our unborn child, so you know why I'm fighting cancer so hard and head on.*

*I'm not looking forward to surgery but I am looking forward to meeting all of you.*

I imagine that this card would have an impact on anyone who read it and could understand the emotions that Matt must have been feeling as he wrote it. But his card had a more personal connection with Amber and our entire unit.

She has graciously allowed me to share why with you. Amber was recently anticipating the birth of her first child, just as Matt and Mara are now. As her pregnancy progressed, our staff also experienced a sense of anticipation and eagerly awaited meeting her daughter. But this anticipation suddenly changed just a few weeks before her birth. Amber lost her baby unexpectedly at 35 weeks.

Although painful, perhaps it was fitting that Matt's outreach would come to Amber. With the memory of her loss so fresh in all of our minds, we immediately felt a connection to Matt and his story. The emotional distance we usually keep collapsed and we were "all in".

*"I immediately wanted to help this family any way I could. Where I had no control over my loss and the outcome, I wanted to help them find some control in a situation life has dealt them.*

*I felt the need to introduce myself to his wife before they came to our unit for the first time. They had so graciously introduced themselves, told us their story, and thanked us before we even met them!*

*Staci and I walked down to the surgical lounge to meet Mara and found her surrounded by a loving, supportive family. You could see the nervousness, but hope for what lies ahead. It's a fact we don't have control over what the next day brings, as much as we'd like to think so."*

*I just wanted to let them know how much their positive, pro-active attitude impacted not only me, but our entire unit. Whatever I could've done to facilitate his recovery, I was committed to do, for him, Mara, and their baby."*

I am very happy to share with you that Matt is doing well. His surgery went as planned as well as his recovery. He was anxiously awaiting his discharge home yesterday.

Matt's story truly embodies what "Your Care. Our Commitment" really means. He reached out to us at a vulnerable moment in his life and asked for our help and we responded.

Although not everyone will reach out to us in the personal way that Matt did, every one of the patients in our hospital has their own unique story. They too have hopes and dreams and look to us to help them have a chance to fulfill them.

Everyone in this room has a role to play in helping that happen. Whether you are a direct patient caregiver or not, it takes all of us working together to be able to provide the care that our patients need to get better and have a chance to return to their lives outside of being our patient. We may never have the privilege of knowing their story, but what we do know is that our commitment is to provide them with the care they need so that they can have that chance.

For Matt it is the chance to be here to see the birth of his child and to become a father. Although each of our patient's stories will be unique, they all have hopes and dreams that are equally important to them.

I hope this story will impact you the way it has for Amber and I and the entire staff of the Surgical ICU. We hope as you go back to your jobs today that Matt's story will help to re-energize you and remind us that what each of us does matters in making these dreams a possibility for every patient in our care.

Thank you.