Teach students compassion by being an excellent role model

While testing to ascertain whether aspiring nurses are compassionate has some value, this vital quality of nursing can and should be taught by example, argues Val Newton

Compassion is a word that many people understand and a quality that we would want nurses to have. Yet some of us would find it difficult to express exactly how we would expect the nursing profession to show compassion.

As the first student nurses to be tested on their ability to show compassion arrive at Welsh universities, the NHS should consider the importance of developing future generations of nurses who truly understand what it means in practice. This is because compassion is fundamental to patient centred care.

Compassion means being kind, considerate, showing concern, offering sympathy and being empathetic. These are all approaches to care.

The real question is: can we actually train nurses to be compassionate?

I believe the key to developing a compassionate nurse is being a role model for them so they know how to act with patients and what kinds of approaches to care they should take. Too often, we make assumptions that a junior nurse instinctively “knows” how to wash or feed a patient or how to deliver fundamental care.

Many of us were taught these fundamental skills during a long apprenticeship, when we were able to benefit from the experience of many skilled nurses who valued high standards of care, in terms of both the practical skills they demonstrated and their understanding that all care should be given in a compassionate manner.

These were the women and men who we all wanted to be like when we became registered nurses ourselves. The thought of not doing our job properly was abhorrent to most junior nurses and many will remember the senior staff nurse or sister who explained how such key tasks were fundamental to good nursing care.

Nurses are sometimes told that, when delivering care, they should ask themselves: “Would you be happy for a member of your family to be treated in the same manner in which they are caring for patients?” This approach is one way of focusing a nurse’s manner when dealing with patients to ensure they are treated with respect, dignity, kindness and empathy.

It is vital for nurses to understand that, when a person is unwell and feeling low, how they are approached and cared for is often much more important to them than technical procedures or treatment received. Care delivered with compassion enhances its delivery and is expected of nurses by patients during their daily practice.

Testing nurses on how compassionate they are may be useful to assess what they have learnt and what they can remember. However, asking a patient: “Do they feel that the nurse has been compassionate?” is crucial when assessing what kind of care is actually being delivered.

When my hospital surveyed patients’ opinions about the care they received, we asked them what they considered to be an important quality of a nurse. Being kind, considerate and compassionate were the three top answers of what patients’ valued.

So, when we developed our nursing strategy for the next three years, key to our mission statement was the idea of being compassionate. Compassion, combined with skill and knowledge, we felt, would ensure the delivery of care that should meet the patients physical and psychological needs with a holistic approach.

Our mission statement is: “To consistently provide high quality, safe and effective care to patients and families, delivered by skilled, compassionate staff who recognise every patient as a unique individual and equal partner in their own care.”

Compassion is the essence of good nursing care. We can teach it by being excellent role models and by considering how we, our family and our patients feel when treated with compassion.

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