Enabling our patients to feel comfortable, less vulnerable and dignified when in our care is an increasingly difficult challenge. In recent years we have seen the necessity for campaigns to end the tolerance of indignity in health and social care settings. And all too often we see media accounts of nurses providing unacceptable standards in delivering health and nursing care.

These news stories are always extremely uncomfortable for everyone, but necessary, as they often inspire action to improve standards. However, they do not inspire confidence in nurses and nursing, and must also dramatically affect our current and future patients – as well as our current and future nurses. These negative stories are relatively small in number when compared with the total number of healthcare episodes, but they have a huge impact on the morale of those nurses who aspire to give excellent care to their patients.

Stories of abuse, neglect and poor standards in healthcare settings must also cause our patients unnecessary stress at a time when they are at their most vulnerable and often when they are most dependent on receiving high-quality care with preservation of human dignity. The effect that poor care has on the patient’s family is also distressing, especially when expectations are not met. A potential consequence for the professional is that they too become vulnerable, as the recipient of undignified behaviour when needing to manage difficult situations, exacerbated when expectations of patients and their families are not met.

Human dignity is about having respect for oneself as well as others. Being respectful at all times is a central element within the essence of nursing. I would argue that being respectful is also about ensuring we give sufficient time to our patients, so they can communicate their needs. We need to give time to really listen to what patients have to say. In my opinion this is our most treasured commodity.

Time is one of the fundamental “dimensions of nursing” that is not readily explored or explained. We often talk about the fundamentals or essence of nursing care; yet fail to quantify the investment necessary to achieve the absolute ideals in terms of the outcomes. Time is often misleadingly defined by the quantity of events that occur in delivering the required skill mix rather than grade mix, would that help us? Yes, most definitely. It would be wonderful: the interruptions for help would reduce, we would have sufficient staff to assist others as and when needed, and we would have time to discuss professional issues. But, most importantly, we would have time to care for our patients.

Is this too much to ask in this time of looming public sector cuts? It is, after all, ‘We need staffing levels that enable us to concentrate on the matter in hand. This would reduce multitasking and allow our patients to be cared for with dignity’

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