Comment

“Think spiritual and be alert to the needs of each patient”

I wonder whether spiritual care is on your radar when you start your shift. Well, it is on mine but then I am an NHS chaplain and my passion and dream are for patients and relatives to receive the spiritual and religious care that they deserve by right.

I gained this passion as a student mental health nurse while on a urology ward placement. I was blithely completing the nursing observations for an older female patient – blood pressure, temperature, urine output, and so on – when she turned to me and said: “How can you possibly nurse me if you don’t know anything about me?”

So, taking the hint, I stopped what I was doing and listened to her story of fears, loves, hopes, dreams and, finally, her plans for what she wanted to happen at the end of her life. This conversation set me off on a life-long interest in spiritual caregiving.

The problem is, there is no tick box for this kind of care. You see, it is not a discrete task – or even a set of tasks – but rather a way of being that requires attentiveness to each individual patient. And it is not something that you can complete entirely, like observations and drug rounds, and then tick off a list, because it depends on human relationships.

So how can we hope to achieve our role as spiritual caregiver in the frenetic, task-driven environment of a busy ward? Well, I can’t answer this with a checklist but I can demonstrate with some stories.

A male patient who had just retired from work was told that he had only months to live. He was withdrawn and tearful. The nurse sat by him for a few moments as he recounted the story of what had happened.

Another patient was terrified of her upcoming operation. The nurse gave her a reassuring smile and held her hand to ease her concerns.

A woman, distraught at her mother’s situation, received a cup of tea from the nurse and, as she drank it, explained her fears and anxieties.

In all of these scenarios the nurse is offering spiritual care. Each deals with the key human characteristics of meaning, purpose and hope. There are, of course, no measurable markers that show you have given good spiritual care but since when has caring and compassionate action needed to be ticked off a list?

Each of those scenarios were real events at the hospital where I work. In each case nurses acted as spiritual caregivers and each of them made a difference to the patient; this resulted in the nurses being commended for their good practice and compassion.

So, as well as the well-defined tasks of your profession, it is worth having spiritual care on your agenda and being alert and attentive to the spiritual needs of each patient. A small action can make a big difference.

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