

From Henry's Desk by Henry Holland

Remember the Nurses of Yesteryear

A few years ago I exchanged e-mails with a lady who had been a polio patient at the Medical College of Virginia Hospital (MCV) in Richmond, VA. This lady is Vera Moore and she was a polio patient at MCV at the same time as I was in 1950. I did not recall meeting Vera while in the hospital, probably because the patients were generally segregated by sex. Shortly after the original exchange of e-mails Vera wrote me again about her husband who had been in a hospital for eight days with a heart problem. Vera wrote:

"I am longing for the days of MCV when nursing must have been at its best. My husband was in the hospital for an 8 day stay with his heart where we found nursing to be non existent. I'm remembering the wonderful nurses at MCV. The tall slender older nurse who nightly gave an alcohol back rub and finished with the bath powder Mother was asked to provide. She was just as starched, unrumpled, spotlessly white, at the end of the day as she was when she came in at 3 p.m. How she was able to stay that way was a marvel because she was constantly busy, straightening bedding, tucking and offering wash cloths when meals were served and emptying bed pans as necessary. Then there was the British nurse who was convinced fresh air was important. She opened the windows every time she came in my room and found them closed. She was very young, may have been a student, but was also starched, efficient, and did not waste a movement. They never left patches of gauze, papers, etc., on the bedside tables on the floor and insisted that I keep my personal items, books, etc., neatly arranged. We saw no nurses that we could identify this visit. Everyone wears rumpled green or crumpled cutie printed garments."

Oh, dear, I've lived too long! So good to hear from you. Thanks for your correspondence.

Vera

Vera's observations raises the question as to whether the nurses and doctors of the polio years were able to relate to their patients in a more meaningful or personal manner than in today's hospital environment. I think Vera's comments have some merit. I believe there has been a change in the bedside care of patients and it did not happen over night. The reasons for such a change are multiple; however, if the personal contact between doctors and nurses and their patients has changed, then why?

As a hospital patient on many occasions throughout my life and as a physician who treated hospital patients for thirty years (1966 - 1996 I have the following observations:

1. Technology has advanced immensely and much more can be learned about a patient in a shorter time period than fifty years ago. The monitors for some of this technology are often at the nurses' station and not always at the bedside.
2. Speed and immediate action on behalf of a patient is often a matter of life and death.
3. Insurance companies and hospitals place great pressure on doctors to shorten hospital stays as much as possible. Many doctors practice defensive and more expensive medicine to reduce the risk of law suits for a bad result, not usually due to negligence.

The actual time spent between the patient and the doctor or the nurse has diminished; thus the interpersonal aspect of the doctor-patient and nurse-patient relationship may be less meaningful than in the past.

Objectivity is admirable, but not at the expense of empathy and a listening ear. Professionalism and a dose of respect for every patient is a worthy goal, even in today's modern world.

The suspicion of profit and greed rampant among many health insurance companies are a relatively new experience for doctors (often called providers). Often people with less training are making decisions about the healthcare of many doctors' patients and these "gatekeepers" have never seen the patient for whom they are making critical decision.

Did not many doctors of the past practice medicine with considerable success? Was it not rare for them to refuse to see a patient? Did they observe and listen to their patients? Did they place money as a priority in their practice? Those doctors and nurses worked with less technology, but I am confident that they spent more time with their patients and often at the bedside. At the time this was called good bedside manner.

My memories of the nurses at MCV on the polio ward are similar to Vera's. I recall the nurses being both young and middle aged. They were clean, neat, dressed in white and spent considerable time at the bedside and not at the nurses' station. While a polio patient at MCV for three months from September to December 1950 I followed the example of other patients and kept an autograph book. Below I have published some examples of nurses' entries in my autograph book. They are simple messages, but their messages communicated hope and optimism. Here are some examples:

Keep looking forward Henry, you'll soon be up walking again
Ann Harrell

Oct. 14, 1950

Dear Henry

To a sweet patient and best wishes

Love, Elizabeth Byrd, RN

Richmond, Va
October 15, 1950

Dear Henry,

It was just you to be so pleasant at all times. Keep on keeping on.

Mrs. Therla Hall P.N. (This nurse was African American)

117 Overbrook Road

11/16/50

Medical College of Virginia

To Henry

One of the nicest and sweetest patients I've ever had.

Keep your chin up and "Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think!"

Marian Brantley (signed with stick figure with red hair)

Remember me well

Remember me long

Remember when

You are well & strong

P.S. Don't be too long

Josephine Marie Murphy

506 Harrison St.

Lynchburg, Va.

Nurse stick figure to the right wearing glasses
with caption saying, "Hey Henry – How about
eating that egg?"

Dec 6, 1950

12/6/50

I like you so much – I hope the best things in life happen to you – You sure have
been a lovely patient. Best wishes for a speedy recovery the rest of the way.

Mary Tomlin

M.C.V. Oct. 17, 1950

To a very sweet and wonderful patient, I wish all the luck in the world:

Here's hoping your stay here will be a very short one.

Your nurse

Mrs. Bryant R.N.

920 West Grace St. City

I can still remember the faces and general appearances of each of these nurses.

The one phrase that has stuck with me for fifty-eight years is the comment
above by Therla Hall P.N. "Keep on keeping on."

When your memories wander back to earlier years, remember those nurses of
yesteryear who often preferred to work with polio patients. The majority of their
patients were children. Daily, most of these nurses brought a ray of sunshine when
they entered a room of emotional darkness.