



The Mysterious Effect of the Quilt

Linda A. Cannon, RN, BSN, OCN®

All of us have heard that a picture is worth a thousand words, yet the 25 pictures on each of the quilts in our office often evoke awed silence. I want to tell you the story of our quilts.

I learned back in my diploma nursing program that healing must address the body, mind, and spirit. In the 40 years since, I have come to appreciate that people are more than their disease; people can be patients with cancer, but they are *not* cancer patients. Patients must have excellent medical and nursing care, of course, but they also want to be known as unique individuals.

We opened the doors to a new community radiation oncology office in June 2011. When patients come into the office for radiation, their lives have been changed forever by something they did not choose. We offer care that reflects the concern for the whole person. We do not have a television in the waiting room; the quiet encourages community building and personal interaction. We have journals in which the patients can share their thoughts and a table where patients can work on jigsaw puzzles, which can be relaxing and meditative. Each patient receives a personalized certificate of graduation to mark the completion of radiation treatment and a bell that marks the momentous occasion. All of these interventions have been well received, but something was still missing.

In my work as an inpatient oncology and hospice nurse, I have had the privilege of working with two amazing art therapists. I witnessed the transformation that can occur when people begin to create. Beth was a hospice patient, in a nursing home, and confined to a wheelchair after a stroke. When Beth made a simple picture of herself driving on

the sandy beach in a convertible with her hair blowing in the wind, the smile on her face revealed the freedom and liberation she discovered. When Irene, a bed-bound hospice patient with hand contractures, created a simple yet lovely picture of a vase of flowers from crumpled multicolored tissue paper, she experienced the pure joy of self-expression and pride as her visitors raved about her creation. During a team-building retreat for the inpatient oncology unit, each staff member created a small paper square representing something important to them—a family picture, a picture of their pet, their favorite vacation spot, or even a favorite mantra or saying. The art therapist then mounted all the squares onto a display quilt that we hung in the unit. The quilt was a constant symbol of our diversity and unity in our mission to serve our patients. Having seen and been part of this transformative power, I wanted our office to have an art project.

After brainstorming with our office specialist Robin Mehl, herself a master quilter, we gave our patients small fabric squares and fabric pens for them to de-



Photo courtesy of Riverside Radiation Oncology. Used with permission.

sign their own quilt squares. After a few initial demonstrations, the creative desire became contagious. Many people protested at first that they were not creative, but, with a little encouragement, even the most reluctant submitted squares. We purposefully chose 6 inch by 6 inch squares—small enough to be manageable but still significant.

One gentleman named Bob liked the idea so much he submitted three squares, one for each round of his cancer treatment, saying, “This really gets me going!” Bob’s squares are all simple line drawings with sayings like, “If you get boxed in, climb right out and begin again.” On one, a green monster says, “If you happen to get sick, I will give the monster a kick!” The third is a picture of a bald person with an earring that says, “I’m too sexy for my hair, that is why it isn’t there!”

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