

A Win-Win Situation

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I recently had “a win” at work and, thankfully, the patient I was caring for did too. The day was as full of surprises; I went in to work intending to provide direct patient care, but found that there were fewer patients than usual on the unit, and was given administrative time instead. Midway through the shift, a nurse entered my office and tearfully asked, “Can you take my patients and approve a schedule swap for me for tomorrow? My mom is sick.” I agreed and picked up her patients. I looked forward to those four hours. In her report, my colleague described her four patients as “jolly,” “enjoying her day,” “very pleasant,” and “the best,” respectively. How often do we use those words in patient reports? I was set up for a win.

I met the first patient, “jolly,” and, noting his accent, asked where he was from. That flowed into a talk about our shared hometown. I met the second patient, “enjoying her day,” who had been with us for a while and I could tell that what she needed was a visit with her family and little from me. I complimented her daughter’s artwork, did my assessment, and left the room. I spoke to the third patient, “very pleasant” (who was five days removed from acute myelogenous leukemia diagnosis), about the signs on her door. I explained that I had not cared for her before and wanted to be sure she knew what neutropenic and chemotherapy precautions were. Her son typed notes onto their shared laptop and I returned with handouts. Their faces showed appreciation. And then, finally, I went to see the fourth patient, “the best.” He was well-known to the staff and someone I had cared for once or twice before, a coach of a local sports team. “Coach,” I began, “how are you feeling?”

“Ann Marie, right?” (He remembered my name! It had been months.) We talked for a bit about his nausea and how he didn’t want to take any more nausea medication.

“How about the grandma kind of things?” I asked. “Saltines and ginger ale?”

He said he would try it. An hour or so later, when I returned to ask how it worked for him, he smiled, said he felt much better, and he asked me to have a seat for a minute.

“You’re a veteran around here,” he began (at which point I took a good deep breath!).

“What do you think my life will be like after this?”

I asked a few questions to clarify what he was asking me for. “Do you mean how long you’ll live? How many follow-up appointments you’ll have?”

“No, what my life will be like. Will I go back to doing what I was doing, in crowds, with people, or will I kind of always be in a bubble with this mask and will I take a pill every day?”

We talked at length about his acute promyelocytic leukemia (APL) diagnosis, the weeks of all-trans retinoic acid and arsenic he had taken at home, and he showed me the cracks in all his nails (and I thanked him because we never see the long-term effects of arsenic in an inpatient setting). We even talked about the translocation of chromosomes 5 and 18. He was happy to share some things about APL and treatment side effects I didn’t know, and I was eager to talk about

blood counts and some stories about the lives of survivors I was blessed to know.

Then the conversation changed. “How do you know when you’ve had a win?” he asked. Again, I wasn’t sure I understood.

“As a nurse, I mean,” he said. “I think about this a lot when I’m here. In my world, it’s easy. I look at a scoreboard and I know when I’ve had a win. How do you, as a nurse, know when you’ve had a win?”

I took a breath and the answers came fast. “When I teach someone something

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new, when I come into a mess and I leave and a patient is tidy and comfortable and fed, when I help a team member, when. . . .”

He pressed on. “But c’mon, you start out in the negative around here, do people leave their work day thinking they’ve had a win?”

“The negative, Coach?” I asked, again slightly confused.

“Cancer, you know, it’s like a cloud. You walk onto this floor at the start of your shift and there’s cancer all around you—pain, suffering; you come in at zero and boom, in the negative. You mean people leave here winning?”

“Yes,” I replied with certainty. “Yes. Sometimes when I wear my manager hat,” I said, “I have to help people see the

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