The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Nursing

Betty R. Ferrell, RN, PhD, FAAN, and Nessa Coyle, NP, PhD, FAAN

In a medical-surgical unit in a small hospital in the midwestern region of the United States, a patient’s suffering is reduced by the night shift nurse. The older female patient has lung cancer. She was admitted two days prior with a bowel obstruction, likely the cumulative result of immobility, inadequate food and fluid intake, medication side effects, and progressive disease. Her uncontrollable nausea, vomiting, and pain over the past few days at home now are relieved by a nasogastric (NG) tube, IV fluids, and careful titration of analgesics. Having finally slept a few hours, the woman awakens in the middle of the night. Given the myriad tubes and wires attached to her body, she remains motionless, afraid to move. Still, her wakefulness stirs her exhausted daughter, who is wedged into a cold, hard reclining chair at her bedside.

Mother and daughter exchange mutual queries: “Are you okay?” “Why don’t you go home?” the mother suggests.

“This chair is fine,” the daughter lies. The patient’s husband went home after a few hours at the hospital. After 55 years of marriage, the angst of seeing his wife so miserably ill and the strangeness of the hospital world were enough to propel him home, despite the terrifying and total silence of an empty house. Mother and daughter reaffirm to each other that he is home asleep, but both know he is probably wide awake, sitting in his easy chair in the living room, sipping stale coffee, reading his Bible, and counting on God to come through. After all, God has come through many times before. He has faith. God will come through again.

Key Points . . .

➤ Suffering is common across phases of cancer; it is thoroughly individual and intensely personal.
➤ Nurses respond to suffering primarily through their presence.
➤ As witnesses to suffering, nurses serve as compassionate voices and advocates for patients and families.
➤ Nurses help patients regain control in the face of illness and cope with vulnerability and the uncertainty of life.

This article has been chosen for a podcast conversation with the authors, presented by the Oncology Nursing Society. Authors Betty R. Ferrell, RN, PhD, FAAN, and Nessa Coyle, NP, PhD, FAAN, share their experiences with suffering in caring for patients with cancer and discuss how nurses can develop techniques for easing patient suffering and the role of nursing education and mentoring in the process. Nurses who care for patients and families regularly also need to protect themselves from compassion fatigue. Ferrell and Coyle discuss the danger of compassion fatigue and some ways nurses can develop resilience. To access the podcast, visit www.onsforum.org.