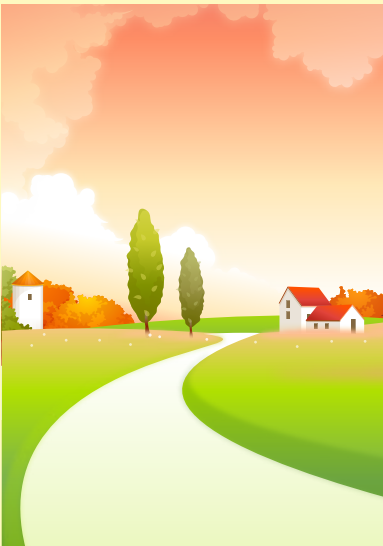


# Walk in My Shoes

## The Role of a Nurse to That of a Family Member

Edited by: Hui-Chen Yang, Supervisor, Dept. of Nursing, Taichung Tzu Chi General Hospital



*The nursing professionals have always been on the front line to care for patients. They have been taught to treat and care for patients as their own family. Nurses are the best source of help and comfort for patients and families.*

*Nursing professionals are accustomed to being the supporters of patients and their families. However, when they have a sudden illness in their own family, how would they respond? Would they calmly cope with the incident? Would they be anxious or lost? What kind of expectations do their families have from them as nursing professionals? In facing these expectations, is there a standard answer?*

*When one of their own family members suddenly becomes ill, the nurse is expected to step into the shoes of a patient family. When the same nurse returns to work and faces other patients' families, what kind of attitude would she bring to her work after her painful experience as a patient's family?*

*The answers have all been positive. Some nurses have a better understanding about the patient family's anxiety and demanding behavior. They are more compassionate to the families. Some colleagues would act as the spokesperson for the family so the patient and family members would have less to worry about during the treatment. Others become critical to the performance of their peers because they now take pride in their profession.*

# Understand the Feelings of Patients' Families

Sai-Shi Wu, RN, Emergency Room, Taichung Tzu Chi General Hospital

## The Midnight Phone Call

It was about 1 a.m., on Dec. 5th, 2011. I was woken up by the sudden telephone ring. On the other end, I heard an unusually nervous and trembling sob. After listening to the sound carefully, I figured out that was my sister's voice. She told me that my father was in the emergency care. I was half-dreaming and half-awake and had not yet grasped what was happening. I gave the phone to my younger sister who was working on her homework. Afterward, she told me that my father, who lives in Taipei, suddenly stopped breathing in his sleep. Our mom discovered that dad was soaked in cold sweat and not moving. They called 119. When the paramedics arrived, father had no vital signs. They immediately tried to resuscitate him. Father was sent to the hospital's emergency room, and there was no conclusive diagnosis yet. All of a sudden, my mind went blank. Everything was fine before I went to bed. We just talked on the phone around 11 p.m. and the bad news came two hours later. The



**The pace of nurses in the emergency room is a race against time. Wu did not quite understand the anxiety of the patients' families. She can now fully appreciate that feeling after she had been one herself.**

feeling of anxiety and helplessness was unbearable.

Holding on to the phone, I could hear my mother's voice, "Your father had a little cold. He didn't have any signs of discomfort. But last night before he went to bed, he wanted to call you and talk to you. Maybe he knew something was going to happen." Immediately, I could not control myself but cried loudly. I hurriedly

contacted my work unit, packed a few simple things and took a taxi. I wanted to be by my father's bedside. As I sat in the car, it seemed to me that Taichung was a long way from Taipei. My tears kept flowing. I looked out of the car window into the darkness of the night, and kept praying, wishing my father would live through this incident.

### **The Unwanted News**

After two hours of traveling, I arrived at the hospital emergency room. Father had been transferred to the Intensive Care Unit. The attending physician explained that this sudden episode was hard to diagnose. They had to wait and observe. The emergency treatment took too long and the brain had been without oxygen during that period. They had to wait and evaluate the degree of the damage to the brain. The worst outcome would be that father might have to be in bed for the rest of his life, as what we usually call a vegetative state. I could no longer pretend to be strong, and I sobbed loudly. This is something that family members do not wish to hear. The image of my working place where family members wait at the entrance of the emergency room flashed through my mind. Now I can now understand how painful and vulnerable that feeling is.

I pulled myself together and entered the Intensive Care Unit. From a distance, I saw my father with all kinds of tubes around him. He lay weakly on the bed. I knew my father, who loved to look his best, would

never be able to accept all the tubes and tape on his clean-shaven face. He had to put up with days without taking a bath. Looking at the equipments monitoring his vital signs, my emotion went up and down like the EKG machine waves. Nevertheless, we had to remain strong and accompany my father through the most difficult days.

### **The Role as a Daughter and a Nurse**

When father was in the hospital, the doctor realized that my sister and I are both nurses, and he actively discussed father's progress with us and consult with us about related issues. As an emergency nurse myself, I am very aware of the prospects of the prognosis and the possible long-term care in the future. However, now as a patient's family member, I wished the doctor could give me a better answer, or even a better treatment that would allow father to stay alive. The struggle between the two roles, as a nurse and as a daughter, vacillated in my heart like a seesaw. Maybe because I understand the hospital environment well, I listened attentively to the doctors' comments and tried not to make too many requests to the hospital to create inconveniences. I gave my trust to the doctors and fully cooperated with their treatment plan. When I noted there was a slight discrepancy between the clinical process and the academic process, I would go home, do research on the subject and later discuss with the doctors to gain a better understanding. After all, we would like the best possible outcome for our father.



Having personally accompanied her father and went through her father's hospitalization, Wu reminds herself to be more patient and compassionate towards anxious families.

During the time when father was in the hospital, because of my nursing background, I was asked to make many decisions. Though I am father's loving daughter, can I really make all those decisions for him? I often ask this question to myself during that period.

### **My Gratitude to Colleagues and Those who Supported Me**

After more than a month's treatment, the doctor said my father can be discharged from the hospital and go home. He was removed from the respirator, but he still had Nasogastric tube connected. I knew well that the road to recovery was only the beginning. I helped mother to arrange for nursing care after father's discharge. During this period, our family suffered both physically and mentally. However, I felt full of love in my heart. I am grateful to all my relatives and friends who were supportive and helpful. I am especially grateful to the assistance provided by my coworkers so that I can stay in Taipei to care for my father. I am grateful to all the encouragement that I received enabling me to face this sudden event with strength. Words would never be sufficient to express my gratitude; I will always remember everyone's kindness, compassion and support.

### **Return to the Emergency Room – More Compassion for Patients' Families**

Having experienced this major event in my life, I am back to the clinical work. The emergency room is the foremost front line of the hospital. We face not only the critical patients, but more importantly, the family members that are devastated by worry. In the past, I treated patients as a priority, and neglected the needs of the family members who were waiting patiently and anxiously by the side. Now, having been a patient's family myself, I have learned to accommodate the immediate demands of anxious family members. My desire to help and give gets me motivated. I offer more compassion and love to the people who have helped me to grow and learn. I will offer them my sincerest blessings.

I learned from my father's ordeal that the most painful experience is the suffering of the patient on the hospital bed. I hope I can use my love and compassion to comfort patients, and make the ward a warmer place instead of a symbol of confinement. I am grateful to all the experience in my life. In the future, I will take each step firmly with gratitude.



# A Patient's Advocate

By Pai-Hsuan Huang, Registered Nurse, Internal Medicine Intensive Care Unit,  
Taichung Tzu Chi General Hospital

## Being My Mother's Nurse

I grew up in a small family of three – a little sister, my mother and myself. Since I was little, my mother has always paid close attention to the health and nutrition of the family. As far as I can remember, my mother was hardly sick; she even barely gets a cold. As I finished nursing school and started to work to alleviate my family's financial burden, all of a sudden my mother was diagnosed with a terminal cancer. She went to the nearby Tzu Chi Taichung Hospital for a series of radiation and chemotherapy. Although the tumor was under control, the nightmare had just begun. Due to the side effects of radiation therapy, for the past four years, my mother had been experiencing persistent pain and suffering from peritoneal fibrosis, radiation enteritis, intestinal atrophy and obstruction. My mother was in such constant pain that she could not help crying and hurting herself. She said her pain was like a

knife carving on her intestine. Even with the self-paid high-pressure therapy and the pain management at the hospice, the relief was limited.

## Support from the Medical Staff

I often sobbed behind my mother and wondered how I could share her suffering. About six months ago, my mother went to a hospital's hospice for pain management and constipation treatment. No doctor at the hospice center was willing to perform surgery on her. I was so anxious while working at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of Tzu Chi Taichung Hospital. I sought help from the head nurse, and with everyone's help, Dr. Chien-Ming Chiu, our colon specialist, consented to take my mother in after evaluating her condition. Therefore, my mother was back to Tzu Chi Hospital for further colonoscopy and colostomy to build a stoma to help fecal movement. My mother was hospitalized for 20 days where she was under the care

With a profession in nursing, Pai-Hsuan Huang serves as a bridge between patients' family and the medical team. She always reminds herself to have a professional mind and a caring smile.



of family doctors, hospice services for pain management, and the wound care nurse for stoma care. I am thankful to the attentive care and compassion of my colleagues, as well as the convenience of the location to my work place. Since then, my worries and stress level has significantly decreased. My mother is still fighting bravely against cancer. With the new stoma, the intestinal obstruction has improved. Although she was hospitalized again once afterward, the pain was significantly less and maintains at about level 4 to 5 as compared to more than 10 in the past. My mother has gained energy and her condition has been improving.

### **Becoming Family with Patients**

When I started my profession as a nurse practitioner, my mother also became ill and came in and out of the hospital. I often thought that while I am taking care of patients, my family is also being taken care of by others. At work, I am devoted to my patients and the thought that my mother was cared for by other devoted nurses brought comfort to my mind.

Even though most of my patients in the intensive care unit are unconscious, I still talk to them with respect, and gently explain the treatment to cheer them up. I would tell them things like, "Time for sputum suction", "I am going to change

diaper", "Let's drink some milk", "You will be recover soon." It is hard not to feel for the patients after taking care of them for some time. When patients pass away, I try not to cry but send my sincere regards to those who are relieved from physical suffering and have become happy angels. I constantly remind myself to have a professional mind and a gentle smile because no one wants to be cared for by an unprofessional and impolite nurse.

### **Being the Patient's Advocate**

One important job of the ICU nurses is to communicate with patients' family during the short family visiting time. We not only explain the patients' conditions to the family but also help ease their anxiety. If there is a concern, we would try to communicate with the physicians to address their needs. In other words, we are the patients' advocates.

A caring smile, an encouragement, and even a consolation would bring warmth to the patients and their family members. With a limited authority of a nurse, I always try my best to deliver professional and sincere service to the patients and their family members, just like I would when treating my own mother.