

Exploring Hualien

A Nursing Student's Internship Experience

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“Why do you have such a big smile on? You must be really happy about something!” an elderly man said to me as I settled down in my seat next to him. I was getting on the train from Taipei to Hualien on my way to a six week long internship in one of the most gorgeous places in Taiwan. I was exhilarated!

McGill School of Nursing offers their students the opportunity to complete their clinical internship outside of the school's affiliated teaching settings, and it was Tzu Chi hospitals' humanistic approach to medicine that attracted me. I was thrilled when I found out about an internship opportunity with Tzu Chi.

When I arrived at the Heart Lotus Palliative Care Unit, I was warmly welcomed by the friendly staff. The nurses and physicians were very knowledgeable about palliative care and they were great preceptors too. At the unit, I quickly learned that palliative care is concerned with three

things: the quality of life, the value of life, and the meaning of life.

The words “心蓮病房” sits atop the entrance of the palliative care ward. The word “palliative” is purposely omitted to prevent feelings of dismay and fear among patients and families. I learned this is done because some patients do not know their diagnosis and people often have the misconception that “palliative care” is equivalent to “abandonment” and “giving up”. This prompted me to think about the following questions regarding palliative care - What is death? When do you begin to label someone as dying? When should palliative care be provided? And what are the ethics regarding the patient's rights and autonomy?

Few people know what dying looks like and it does not help that medicine places much emphasis on life sustaining treatments and promotes it until “it is time”. It was difficult for me to witness the struggle and pain families go through during that

shift where the decision is being made in regards to stopping curative treatments. I had the chance to shadow a nurse working in “share care.” With her, I visited patients and families on various wards that were in the difficult process of confronting the extreme fragility of their loved one’s lives. Prior to this experience, I used to hold the erroneous belief that palliative care should be provided at the terminal stage of an illness, but through these visits, I learned that palliative care should start at the time of diagnosis and continue until death because every person has the right to expect relief from suffering, whether or not its cause can be eradicated.

On the ward, I am often greeted by families and friends gathered by the

bedside to keep watch of their loved ones. By doing so, the families and friends are also helping their own subsequent adjustments. I will always remember the mind-reading ways in which the nurses comfortably relate to these families and normalize the experience empathically. They reassure families; they discuss about pain and reasons for medications and explain the process of dying. To do so, knowledge of at least some rudimentary cross-cultural bereavement customs is needed. I was delighted to learn that the Heart Lotus Palliative Care Ward is unique in Taiwan for its sensitivity of different religious traditions.

Although Tzu Chi is a Buddhist organization, Tzu Chi Hospital accepts the beliefs of other religions and accommodates



Photo shows that Katherine Yu(middle) joins the palliative care team to escort a terminally-ill patient home.

to those needs. For example, on the ward, there was a Buddhist prayer room as well as a chapel for praying. In addition, I recall being approached by a patient's daughter, a catholic nun, who told me that this ward was like "heaven." I believe this is the product of the boundless love philosophy practiced by Tzu Chi.

The holistic approach used at Tzu Chi covers many of the same concepts of the McGill Model of Nursing, which is the philosophy practiced by my school. One notable exception is that Tzu Chi thinks

of patients as family and treats them with the same respect. It was very touching to hear the remarks of one elderly man that was discharged from the ward. He and his family came back to the ward to pick up some paperwork. When I asked him how he was doing at home, this adorable grandpa pointed to the room he had stayed in and replied that "home" was on the Heart Lotus Palliative Care ward.

The passion for palliative medicine can be felt on the ward as the team constantly strives to improve the care provided.



A group photo taken after a free clinic held in a remote area in Taitung County, eastern Taiwan. The free clinics are often held monthly by the Eastern Taiwan Chapter of Tzu Chi International Medical Association.

Although death is normalized and much is a routine on the ward for health care professionals, each death and each passing is unique and a new learning experience for everyone.

When people hear of my placement choice, they often remark, "Isn't it depressing to work there?" There are no words to describe witnessing young and old deaths, listening to health care professionals talk to families about acknowledging the inevitable and preparing for it, seeing the incomprehension and chaos that arises in families from it, and being in the presence of dead bodies. But these challenges made me realize how significant palliative care is. Many people have a fear towards dying and it can be especially difficult for patients and families. The ability to be present with them and supportive at these difficult and most vulnerable moments is a very gratifying experience. By spending quality time with patients and families, nurses on the ward develop a special relationship with each patient and family. It is the inside jokes and stories told at the bedsides that I will forever remember.

The whole experience on the ward taught me not to fear death, that "nearness to death does not obliterate personal identity... [rather, it]...can be a catalyst for expressing some of our most human qualities, such as compassion, forgiveness, and the review of one's life course" (Kaufman, 2005). Nearness to death brought to light some of the true beauties of life.

Aside from interning on the palliative ward, I took the opportunity to attend other programs offered at the hospital, such as, medical outreach programs and health fairs that provide free services to people in remote and impoverished areas. I also had the chance to go to a home visit and to a health clinic in Tian Xia. It is wonderful knowing that tremendous opportunities exist in nursing.

My five weeks at Hualien gave me the opportunity to experience nursing with the humane touch that is often lost on busy hospital floors. Caring for those in the delicate balance between life and death taught me how to cry and laugh, and most of all, to discover life for its beauties.

Thus, my internship was an unforgettable experience, but it was the people that made it such a positive and enjoyable experience. Apart from the seriousness of the internship, I had an amazing time exploring the community. I was invited for tea at my preceptor's house. I biked and explored the mountains with my energetic roommate. I learned about geography and insects from a fantastic doctor. I discovered and learned about Taiwanese culture. Throughout my stay, I met many wonderful and friendly people.

As the often remarked saying goes, Hualien has "好山好水"(beautiful mountain and ocean) and I would like to add "好人"(beautiful people), therefore, Hualien is truly "好粘"(attractive to me)!