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A Side of Compassion

“Um ... I don't think *this* is in my job description...” I joked around with Mrs. J. as I dug through her shrimp stir-fry with a flimsy, plastic fork. Searching through the tangled mess of gelatinous, undercooked stir-fry noodles for the prize – the tiny, pink, delicate spicy shrimp as we laughed about the silliness of the situation. We laughed. She was thrilled that I was willing to fish out the delicious shrimp from the heavy and wet, basically disgusting, noodles on the plate. I couldn't blame her. I wouldn't really want to eat those hospital noodles either.

“I think I caught them all? Anything else I can do?” I asked as I started my way toward the door. “No, thanks sweetheart.” “Ok, call if you need anything,” I reminded her gently shutting the door.

Compassion in healthcare is often discussed in abstract terms, but the roots of it are actually quite simple. Treat patients not as patients but as people. What really makes a difference to the people we serve as healthcare providers are the small acts that show we acknowledge their presence, empathize with their struggles and relate as fellow humans.

Compassion doesn't have to take much time; it just has to make the patient's day better. To make the person feel heard and valued. It takes only a few extra minutes to show them how to use the television in their hospital room and only a few seconds to wait for them to settle into bed before taking their blood sugar. Even when you are pressed for time because there are always million other things that need to be done, it is only a brief moment that makes the difference. Returning promptly to the room with the promised pitcher of water may seem like an insignificant thing to those of us working day in and day out in healthcare, but to the ill, anxious or frightened patient, it *is* significant. We have hundreds and hundreds of patients over the years and naturally over time we become desensitized to these mundane tasks, but in their time of need, the patient may only have a handful of nurses, doctors and other healthcare staff and every interaction means a heck of a lot to them.

I returned to Mrs. J.'s room to remove her dinner tray. Having spent the past few days in the hospital for a bilateral radical mastectomy, she faced uncertainty, pain and a tough struggle ahead. Simple movements, such as lifting her arms to maneuver her dining utensils, were each accompanied by an aching jolt of pain. “How was the shrimp?” I questioned. “Delicious,” she answered with a smile on her face.

So, while picking shrimp out of noodles might technically not be in my job description as a nursing assistant, having the compassion to do so certainly is.