

## A little tenderness goes a long way

**A brief encounter with a dying patient continues to inspire.**

*By Lucy Galland, RN, OCN, BSN*

All nurses have stories about interesting patient encounters. Some are funny, some are sad, but all are learning experiences. You can gain valuable insight from these encounters, and in some instances you'll come away from the experience a better person and a better nurse. Late one night many years ago, I had a brief encounter with a patient that made a profound impression on me.

### Helping Mr. Lincoln

It was one of those nights when it seems as though the clock is racing and the work will never get done. It was 3 a.m., and my coworkers and I had been responding as promptly as we could to the patients' call lights. I'd just sat down in hopes of starting my voluminous paperwork when a call light went on. It was Mr. Lincoln, 60, who had end-stage metastatic cancer.

I sighed as I got up and headed down the dark hallway to his room. *What could he possibly want now? I thought. A nurse had just been in there 10 minutes ago.*

As I entered the room, I asked Mr. Lincoln what I could do for him. "I don't know; I just can't sleep," he said. He denied any pain, yet he appeared anxious and uncomfortable.

In frustration I found myself saying, "Please help me help you by telling me what I can do to make you feel better."

To my surprise, Mr. Lincoln replied, "Well then, I'd like some toast and warm milk."

As I warmed up a cup of milk and waited for the toast to pop out of the toaster, my mind was ticking off all the things I still needed to do. When I brought the snack to Mr. Lincoln, he asked me to cut up the toast into small, bite-sized pieces and soak them in the milk. I realized I'd have to feed him because his arms were too edematous for him to feed himself.

As I fed him his milk-soaked toast, I was reminded of injured baby birds my older sister and brother would

bring home when we were children. My mother would soak bread in milk until the bread became almost liquid and drop it into the birds' open waiting mouths in hope of building their strength. I shared the story of the baby birds with Mr. Lincoln, and we talked softly until he'd finished every bite. He fell asleep shortly afterward, and I finished up my shift.

### Touched by an angel?

Reporting for work the next night, a nurse startled me by flinging her arms around me as I walked in the door. "I

just wanted to hug an angel," she exclaimed. Needless to say, I was flabbergasted. Smiling, she explained that Mr. Lincoln told her an angel came into his room during the night, fed him milk and toast, stroked his arm, and talked softly to him until he fell asleep. He said he slept so well that he'd never forget it.

I felt embarrassed, as I'm hardly an angel and had done very little to deserve such an accolade. I also felt slightly ashamed, remembering how preoccupied I'd been with other work and how begrudgingly I'd spent time with Mr. Lincoln. But I was grateful that I apparently hadn't conveyed my impatience to him. I felt humbled that such a simple act of human interaction could have made such an impact.

That night I stopped in Mr. Lincoln's room. When he saw me he said, "Thank you for what you did for me last night. I'll never forget it."

Mr. Lincoln died a few days later, but I'll never forget that night either. I think about it whenever I feel frustrated and rushed at work. It reminds me never to underestimate the importance of a simple act of human caring.

No, an angel didn't go to Mr. Lincoln's room that night. A very imperfect human entered the room, in the form of a nurse, and offered him the comfort and human contact that nurses around the world provide every day. ✧

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