

Moments with Marcus

By Marcus Engel

“All Things to All People”

Early this summer, my dad spent a few days in the hospital after a collapsed lung. Dad is 81 and, other than a bit of prostate cancer, he is fit as a proverbial fiddle. Dad is also kind, wise and has a quick wit which is usually expressed by gentle teasing. He is almost always sporting a smile and has never met a stranger. In addition, he’s medically literate and a good patient. Nurses, like most everyone else, find him charming and fun.

While he was hospitalized, Dad and I spent hours on the phone, and I was able to overhear many of the interactions with his nurses and techs. Some were really great examples of communication. Like the nurse who explained the monitors and their sounds. Hearing her comfort Dad, “This short beep is just telling us you’re ready for a new bag of IV fluids. And this bonk sound just means one of your wires came loose. Nothing to worry about.” Her communication was meant to comfort him, but my dad doesn’t stress much anyway, so it was me who was comforted.

See, I live 1000 miles away from my parents, so distance posed an obstacle to being there. And then there is Covid-19. And a hospital policy of no visitors. Not even my mother could be by my dad’s side as he went into surgery. And no one could be there for him as he was in the recovery room. And no one could stop by his room during any of the three nights and four days he was hospitalized.

Of course, this time of Covid means now, more than ever, nurses are having to take on dual roles: physical caregivers AND family comforters.

No one be all things to all people. Intellectually, we all know this. Trying to please everyone ends in disappointment and exhaustion, especially for the pleaser.

During this unprecedented madness, nurses are being asked to do something that stretches them beyond boundaries: be both nurse *and* family to patients.

Isolation is one of the most sinister horrors of this pandemic. Patients are often left frightened, confused and terribly alone with none of the comfort of family around them. Restricting visitation has been an unfortunate necessity... and it’s added an extraordinary amount of pressure to the role of nurses. As if the weight of the job weren’t enough, as if the fear of catching Covid wasn’t already hanging over everything, now nurses are asked to fill in the gap. With no family members at the bedside, a nurse now often has to be the patient’s social interaction, medical interpreter and their sole comforter.

I believe most nurses chose the profession for both the compassion and the science. The nature of nursing is the physical care of a person, but filling the psycho-social needs of patients is also

high on the list. Still, when those at the bedside are asked to fill ALL a patient's needs? That's a big ask.

Thank you, nurses for answering yes to that big ask. For not flinching when your patients need you, when your facility needs you, when your co-workers need you, and when your patients need you. Thank you for continuing to be the embodiment of presence, of those two compassionate words: I'm here. And, thank you for taking care of my dad.

Marcus Engel really likes healthcare professionals!

He's also the author of "The Other End of the Stethoscope" and "I'm Here: Compassionate Communication in Patient Care."

Marcus speaks, writes and lives to provide insight and strategies for excellent patient care.

MarcusEngel.com and ImHereMovement.org is where you can find him.