

## Making a Difference at the End of a Patient's Life

By Mary Boudreau

As a “returning” nursing student who also has a degree in Social Work, I embrace the holistic care approach to nursing practice. This is particularly important in addressing the needs of those who are approaching death. This point was very clear to me as I cared for “Jane”, during my first clinical rotation in a hospital setting. “Jane” had been valiantly fighting cancer of the blood during the past few months, and her health had taken a severe turn for the worse during the week I was assigned to care for her. Although my nursing skills were limited, my care with Jane made a significant difference at the end of her life.

Jane suffered from a very rare cancer, and I was dismayed to learn of the low chance of survival when I researched her condition. She realistically understood her poor chance of survival, but remained hopeful about the future. Jane had a strong relationship with her partner of many years as well as her adult daughter and her children. However, they were having a great deal of difficulty bearing the strong possibility that she would not survive. Jane had always been a strong leader and a woman “with attitude” and she struggled with her increasingly dependent role in the hospital.

As I performed my nursing assessment, I was particularly sensitive to the constant pain that she experienced. The nursing staff had cared for her intermittently for many months and was concerned because medications that relieved her pain also severely dropped her vital signs. As I listened to Jane discuss the possibility of her impending death, I was able to help her sort out what she needed to communicate to the people who mattered the most to her, and to assert herself with the medical staff about balancing the

need for pain relief with her desire to be as coherent as possible. She was such a vibrant and energetic woman that it was difficult for her family to imagine their world without her. She expressed a great deal of gratitude to me for being an “outsider” who could help her sort out her feelings and needs apart from her family.

On the second night I worked with her, she was even weaker. Fortunately, during the day, I was able to dig up archives of a Quilt display she had volunteered to organize over a decade before. She was delighted to see pictures of herself in her healthier days, and to reminisce about her accomplishments. In addition to meeting her basic needs, I feel that I was able to help her in preparing for her death, which occurred later that week. I came to her funeral, which was packed with the many people whose lives she had touched. I was grateful that I was able to be a support to one who had mattered so much to so many.