

## **The Catholic Doctor is In: Nurses are the real heroes**

May 6-12th is designated National Nurses week. May 6, National Nurses Day, begins the week honoring the dedicated nurses across this country for their exemplary work. The week ends on May 12, which is the birth date of Florence Nightingale (born 1820). She is the founder of professional modern nursing as we know it today.

I learned very early in my career the importance of the nursing staff. Many years ago, as an intern covering the intensive care unit at night, I figured out quickly how to swallow my pride and ask the nurses for guidance. Some of the nurses had worked in the intensive care setting for decades, and I soon discovered they knew as much or more than my senior resident in charge. During the first months after I received my M.D., I can still remember receiving calls in the middle of the night and having no idea what order to give. The professors in medical school did their best, but not all the various scenarios can be covered. The reality is that there is on-the-job learning. In situations where I needed help, the ICU nurses would tactfully tell me what other experienced doctors would order in that particular situation. This was their way of teaching me without making me feel like a complete buffoon.

Having a well-trained nurse taking care of critical patients may be the most important ingredient for a successful outcome in the hospital. Even now, when I get calls from experienced nurses, they not only describe the problem, but may suggest to me what orders they are seeking to best treat their patient. Most of the time they indeed receive the orders they ask for, because they are correct.

Nurses are the best patient advocates. If a patient is having pain and the current analgesic prescribed is not controlling that pain, they are quite skilled at lobbying the attending doctor to order something more effective. In my experience, pain control is not the forte of many physicians and our wonderful nurses will remain persistent until their patient has what they need to be comfortable. On so many occasions patients will bond with their nurses and have such a high enough level of trust that they would rather discuss serious decisions about their medical care with them, rather than the doctors. The subject may be as important as end-of-life wishes. I always greatly appreciate the nursing staff guiding me in these critical decisions.

Physicians usually make rounds in the morning and don't see their patient again for 24 hours. It is the nursing staff that is assigned to a patient for 12 hours straight, giving them the care they need. It is usually the nurses who are holding the hand of the patient as they receive bad news from the doctor. It is the nurses who are there to relieve the patient's pain and provide comfort. It is frequently the nurses who stand vigil in the room with the patient as they are taken into God's hands, and I have witnessed many nurses shedding tears with the family as they mourn the loss.

I cannot adequately express the admiration I have for the nurses I have had the honor to work with over these many years. I ask all of you reading this to not only thank the nurses you know, but to pray for them as well. They are on the front lines of health care, and we need their continued dedication to provide the comfort and love our patients deserve when they are sick and suffering.

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