YOU ARE NEVER 'JUST' AN AGED CARE NURSE

A personal story

As nurses, we try and numb ourselves from 'feeling' or from getting too attached to our patients. We know people are going to die, well at least in my line of nursing, I tell myself that 'it's ok because they have lived their lives.'

We normalise death this way, every day. However, you always get that resident or patient that 'hits you' and you are overwhelmed because they have hit you and they are overwhelmed with emotion when they rest (die). No matter how much you rationalise, you always find yourself asking questions. This isn't your relative so why are you getting so upset? What are their family members to do?

One afternoon, I sat holding the hand of a dying woman who had been with us for two years. I can't really explain the thoughts I was having. As a nurse and caregiver I was finding it difficult to watch and I knew exactly what was going to happen. I wondered how much more distressing and painful it would be for their loved ones? I will spare you the details, but I sat there and prayed her husband would be delayed in getting back and he would find her at rest. I didn't want him to see her this way.

Now I do believe in God, but at that moment I could understand the desire for euthanasia. Watching someone 'suffer' and go through interventions that provide the quality of life or 'cure him or her' is heart-breaking. As she breathed her last, I thought 'thank God her husband didn't see her last moments'.

Why do I share this story? Because in my experience aged care nurses are so often locked down upon and seen to be taking the easy way out by working in aged care! Please let me explain why that is so far from the truth.

What you don't get to see are the nurses who leave an hour or more after their shift ends. You don't see the nurses who know everything about their residents, their children and grandchildren. You don't see the nurses who will take time out, even on their days off, to make activities or research family histories, just so they can come and share what they have found with the residents.

You don't see the nurses who work short staffed and still ensure the residents get the care they require. Nurses who will work overtime waiting for another nurse to arrive for their shift.

You don't see the nurses who know everyone's name, all 100 residents. Nurses who are able to identify who it is just by looking at a photo of a wound (we are a sad bunch!). We joke about nurses not needing to pee and constantly getting UTI's... well that's because our own toilet runs take up valuable time where we could be doing something for our residents.

You don't see the nurses who are constantly fighting for your loved one's rights, the right to be sent to the hospital. We are questioned like idiots and we battle with pharmacies to get the medications right, we make sure GPs actually attend to the residents and report our concerns! Listen to these nurses, they know their residents and if they say something is wrong, something is wrong.

You don't see the nurses who come into a resident's room when they are at the terminal phase of their lives. They pay their respects and say goodbye, regardless of whether the resident is aware of them being there or not. This is not a job requirement, yet they do it, not for show but because they care.

You don't see the nurses who will make sure the resident is comfortable and ensure their room environment won't leave a horrible lasting memory with family and friends who come to spend time with their loved ones in their last moments.

You don't see the nurses who attend resident's funerals because families have welcomed us into their lives and have seen the genuine love and care we show for their own loved ones. Aged care nurses don't just care for the residents in a facility, they care for families as a whole in the community.

You don't see the nurses who embrace each other after traumatic or stressful events. I have walked out of a room straight into the arms of a colleague, not because I asked for it but because she knew. There was no need to say anything, those hugs say a lot and so much more. They say 'I'm here for you, I understand, and it's ok to cry and give a hug that says they are at rest now, they had suffered enough'.

What you don't see is people from different places, countries, races and religions all coming together and standing by each other and becoming so much more than colleagues. I hope people can realise that aged care nursing is no walk in the park, nor is it a cop out, but it's really a calling. If it isn't and you are in it for the money, you will soon be out. It isn't something you can do if you have no love. This can't be taught!

To my colleagues, who are like family, it's always an honour to work beside you. You make me proud to be an aged care nurse. Thank you for not giving up or burning out. I pray you keep doing what you are doing and soon everyone, as well as our Government, will value aged care nurses for who we are and what we do for millions of people.

Your service is priceless! Next time anyone brushes you off as 'just an aged care nurse'... please kindly remind them, while you are readjusting your crown, that you are never just. You are an aged care nurse who has been entrusted with the care of their loved one's friends and family.