

## Relating to Christian Patients

The Bible is full of examples of Christians who suffer for one reason or another. Perhaps the most obvious example is Job – a man who was blameless and upright (1:1) yet who suffered the pain of extreme loss, (his sons and daughters were all killed in a ‘freak’ accident); of sudden destitution, (his property was all lost to raiders and natural disaster); and of physical pain, (a body covered in sores). Suffering in its many forms is part of the Christian experience. As Christians we are not promised exemption from the pain of living in a fallen world, but we do know that we do not live for this world alone – that our eternal destination is heaven where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain (Revelation 21:4); and that we haven’t been abandoned in our suffering, but that God himself suffered for us when he hung on the cross.

### Drawing alongside one another

This can be one of the greatest comforts for Christians who are suffering – just knowing that you are a Christian, and are with them in spirit as well as physically present, can be so uplifting. It is often received as another of those blessings that God showers our lives with – providing Christian fellowship and support when we need it most, demonstrating his control, his presence and his concern for us. Do make the most of these opportunities to talk personally about Christ, and not simply what your church is doing. It doesn’t have to be a lengthy conversation, but if you can just say something about God’s character, his goodness, mercy and faithfulness it can help to refocus a fellow Christian’s mind when other things seem overwhelming. It is Christ who is our rock, our fortress, who gives us strength when we have none – he is the best medicine we can administer on our drug rounds. If you are in the habit of memorising scripture why not write it down on a piece of paper and share it with your patients – get them to help you to remember it, but also to reflect on it together and see how God is working in your lives. If you think you might get into trouble for praying with your patients on the ward why not ask your patients before you go off duty how you can be praying for them before you go to bed.

### A Psalm a day keeps the doctor away

Although I write this in jest, it is true that pain can be brought on and exacerbated by an unhelpful mental state. The Psalms are, among other things, God’s gift to us to help us deal with our feelings and emotions. It is quite natural that there will be occasions when your Christian patients just want to cry out to God, ‘Why me Lord? What have I done to deserve this? Why won’t you take this pain and suffering from me?’

Well this is exactly the cry of the psalmists on many occasions. They pour their hearts out to God in ways that can often give voice to the pain and anguish we feel inside in times of suffering – but they also provide the answers too. They don’t directly answer the question ‘Why me?’ but they do provide the only possible response which is to dwell on the nature and character of our sovereign God. Look at such Psalms as Psalms 3, 6, 13, 23, 25, 38, 40, 57, 63, 96, 70, 71, 73, 77, 86, 88, 103, 116, 121 and 146.

Encourage your patients to dwell on some of the psalms – you could even write out some of the shorter ones (!!) onto a small piece of card to give to patients as you feel prompted by the Holy Spirit.

## **Telling the Good News**

In 1 Peter 3:15, the apostle exhorts us ***always*** to be prepared to give an answer to every one who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have – always! I often think that Christian patients can do far more to witness to our colleagues than we can. Nobody is going to try to throw the Code of Conduct or hospital policy at them for talking about Christ. Why not encourage your Christian patients to use (not abuse!) the opportunities of a ‘captive audience’ to witness to staff and other patients. When Paul was in prison for preaching the gospel it didn’t stop him telling people about Christ. In fact he says that his imprisonment had actually worked to serve the gospel (Philippians 1:12-13). Depending on where we work, our colleagues can see so much of pain and misery that it can make a huge impact on them when they see someone reacting in a remarkably different way to their experience of suffering.

## **Christian diversity**

Perhaps the hardest thing is trying to support and relate to Christians whose theology – especially as regards illness and suffering – is different from our own. I always found it very hard looking after patients whose understanding of the present Christian experience led them to expect freedom from illness and suffering now, or those who held the conviction that suffering is a direct punishment for a particular sin, or those who thought their faith was lacking because they hadn’t been cured. I always felt handicapped and unable to offer them comfort, since the only thing they would accept as comfort was vindication of their faith and victory over their illness. It isn’t necessarily appropriate to challenge our patient’s theology, (although on occasions I have tried!), but it *is* always possible to find some common ground, whereby you can join together in praising God. And actually that is more important – that God is praised, for he is the creator of the heavens and earth and so worthy of praise. When our patients are comforted by Christ they praise him for his compassion and mercy, and that is beautiful and pleasing in God’s sight. But even if we cannot encourage our patients to see God’s compassion towards them we can still help them to praise him.

## **Activity**

- 1. Why not look together at some of the psalms outlined above and work out in which situations you might use different psalms.**
- 2. Make a note of two or three comforting things that are mentioned in each psalm so that you can comfort your patients with God’s word as you point them to it.**
- 3. How has God been encouraging you this week? Can you think of any of your patients that you could tell this to for their encouragement?**
- 4. Look up in a concordance some of the passages that refer to God as our rock, refuge and fortress. What comfort have they to offer people in pain? Make a note of some of them so that you pass on this comfort to your patients.**
- 5. Why not buy a pocket-sized note book and write in it some of the passages and comments that you have looked at in this activity. Then you can pop it in your uniform pocket so as always to have words of encouragement handy for any patient that might welcome them.**