

Relating to Non-Christian Patients

The scene is a familiar one: a patient unhappy either because they are in pain or because once again they find themselves in hospital needing treatment. You are their named carer and need somehow to help them in this situation. (I once remember a fellow nurse reminding me that patients are never at their best in hospital. This might seem obvious but it's helpful to bear in mind when we find ourselves in a particularly difficult situation wondering why nothing we do seems to help.) So how can we as Christians relate to patients who are not Christians and help them in their suffering?

Romans 12:9 onwards is a very helpful passage. As Christians we are very aware of the great love God, in Christ, has shown in saving us. As we live day by day it is part of our calling to attract others to Christ and showing Christ-like love is part of doing this. Romans 12:9 begins by saying that our love should be genuine. This is often hard to do when we find ourselves on a very busy shift with little time to spend with each patient. It is good to remember that God takes note of the little details in life and so even a cup of cold water given with a loving attitude is commended by God (Matt 10:42). Small acts of love at a time of suffering can mean so much to patients and their relatives. In writing an account of his time in hospital with his wife Barbara, Brian Edwards says that in the midst of a time of ongoing suffering, it is the little things that really stand out. A cup of tea brought with a smile was the example he chose!

Identifying with patients can be another way of relating to them. 'Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep', Romans 12:15 continues. When Jesus was at Lazarus' grave he wept along with the rest of Lazarus' family. He showed he was human and that he cared. As healthcare professionals we might literally have a ministry of tears as we share with patients in their suffering. However just making time to listen to a patient can mean so much. This is often difficult given the busy nature of working in the NHS, however it is during these times that patients can really open up. As we think about non-Christian patients sharing their suffering with us, it can provide the opportunity to ask questions such as, 'Do you have a faith to help you at a time like this?' This just might open the door to further conversation about the gospel but even if it does not it could be a means of starting them thinking about God.

Romans 12:20 goes on to talk about meeting practical needs. 'If your enemy is hungry feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.' Whilst non-Christian patients might not be our enemies, when a patient is suffering, it can be difficult to know how to care in the best way as nothing we do seems to help. These verses encourage us to carry on caring whatever the circumstances. Giving patients food and drink, doing their dressings, helping them go to the toilet – our attitude in all these day-to-day activities should show something of Christ and so make Him attractive.

'Continue steadfastly in prayer' (Colossians 4:2). Combining prayer with all we do is a vital part of our ministry. Praying for patients might sound obvious but it is often something we forget to do! It is easy to be so absorbed in what we are doing at work that we forget to commit it all to God. We can only do so much in terms of caring for patients. With God nothing is impossible (Matthew 19:26). As Christian nurses our aim in nursing non-Christian patients is to attract them to Christ. We can pray that as we work God will speak through our

actions and 'Open a door for the word to declare the mystery of Christ' (Colossians 4:3). We can often underestimate the power of prayer as it is much less tangible than doing something for a patient. What a privilege though to be able to commit our patients into the hands of the One who made them and knows all about them!

You might be thinking, well this is all very nice but what about the patient whose suffering carries on over a long period of time when it's hard to keep on loving and giving and you do not feel like you are getting anywhere? I would like to share a story with you about a patient I saw recently. This particular gentleman had come into hospital 158 times in the last year – so he was there more often than I was! Each time he came he was alone and did not appear to have anyone who cared. He had no next of kin and no one ever rang for him. He was ill as a result of years of alcohol abuse and subsequent homelessness. It felt as if he had a gaping wound and that each time he came into hospital we were just sticking a plaster over it and saying 'There, there, it will be alright' and sending him on his way again. I shared my frustration about this man's care with a colleague and my desire to do something more to help him. My colleague wisely said to me that there were many such patients and that yes it would be great to do more for them, however there was something I could do whilst this man was in hospital. I could give him the best care possible and show him as much love as possible and thus make his time in hospital as good as possible. So whilst it might seem a bit daunting thinking about trying to witness to all the different patients we come into contact with, especially those we see for prolonged periods, we can take it one shift at a time and one patient at a time!

Loving, identifying with, meeting practical needs and praying are some of the ways in which we can relate to our patients. As we do this, remember 'whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.' (Colossians 3:23)

Questions for Discussion

- 1. Look at the following verses from Romans 12:9-21. What might it look like to put them into practice at work?**
 - a) Love must be sincere**
 - b) Be patient in affliction**
 - c) Be faithful in prayer**
 - d) Bless those who persecute you**
 - e) Mourn with those who mourn**
 - f) Live in harmony with one another**
 - g) Be willing to associate with people of low position**
 - h) Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody**
- 2. In what ways do the actions mentioned above enable you to reach out with the love of Christ to non-Christians?**
- 3. What barriers do we face to meeting patients practical and emotional needs?**
- 4. How can we strive to keep the perspective of working for the Lord not men alive at work?**