A Day in the Life of a Hospice Nurse

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It takes a special frame of mind to choose a career in nursing and that might be said doubly for nurses involved with hospice programs. Angie Krall, the Nursing Supervisor at the in-patient hospice center in Van Wert, understands both the highs and lows of her field.

Although the in-patient facility in Van Wert has only been open to patients for a few weeks, Krall is no stranger to the hospice program or the Community Health Professionals. Raised in the Willshire area, Krall moved away and earned her nursing degree before working in a small hospital in Wisconsin on a med-surg floor for about three years. During her time there she began serving on an as-needed basis with their home health care program and the idea stuck with her. When she moved back home to Van Wert County seven years ago, she interviewed with Donna Grimm at CHP and immediately went into their home hospice program.

"It was just one of those things that I really fit into the niche," Krall said.

She said that for all hospice patients there is a time when they decide the program is right for them. They have come to terms with the fact that they want to be kept comfortable for the remainder of their life - whether that be two days, two months, two years or even longer - and that is the point when the frame of mind of the hospice nurse is important. Not only must they provide medical support but just as vital is the emotional, and sometimes spiritual, support.

Krall said that one of the questions she gets frequently from her friends or family: How are you able to be a hospice nurse? To her, however, she finds that side of her career as one of the most rewarding parts of being a nurse. What helps is that the patient has already come to terms with their choice. The decision often means a hospice nurse is as much emotional support for the patient's family who many times are not quite as ready or have not yet made the adjustment mentally.

"They need a lot of support to know what is going on. We do a lot of education in hospice," Krall said. "Both in home care and in the in-patient center. It's teaching
that you take care of the family as much as the hospice patient.

She said one of the things that is so amazing about being a hospice nurse is that the families never forget the nurses once they have been through a situation with them. Krall said she is often stopped either on the street or in a store by a relative of a former hospice patient.

Krall laughed when asked what a typical day is like as a hospice nurse because they can change so quickly for what is planned. What may start as a routine day at 7 a.m. can be altered immediately by either a new patient arriving or one leaving. As the nursing supervisor, Krall must spend more time than she likes to think on paperwork each day as well as regular administrative duties such as planning the nursing schedule for the next period. Adding confusion to what was going to be a routine day is the fact that she also performs consultations for patients to see if they should be in the home or in-patient hospice programs. All it takes is a telephone call from St. Rita's Hospital in Lima or a family in Van Wert and she hops in her car and off she goes. Because the in-patient facility is still so new, she also is involved with making calls on area hospitals and doctors so they understand what the center does and what is needed to register a patient.

But when the day does maintain some semblance of regularity, Krall does have a routine. She starts by reviewing the notes on the patients from the day before. From there she and the staff review the level of care for the patients since that can vary from day to day. Most importantly, however, she makes sure to walk the rounds and see every patient in the facility at least once every day, even on days when it was not planned for her to do patient care. She thinks it helps her to stay in touch with each patient and their families and their needs.

That is also the reason why she loves her career so much.

"The people," she answered without hesitation when asked what is the best part of her job. "The patients and the families, meeting them and learning about them and their lives. We have some fascinating people and the stories they can tell are really interesting."

Of course the flip side to the question deals with the worst part of the job.

"Losing the people is hard," she said. "But sometimes it is harder than others because there are times when it is a blessing for them when it is their time. You have to look at it in that way and understand it is better for them."

Which is why it takes the right nurse to work in hospice care.