

QUESTION

What lessons did I learn from my experience with cancer and COVID-19 during the pandemic?

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As a nursing student back in the late 1970s, I thought I would not work in oncology because it hit too close to home; my mother, my grandmother, my grandfather, and a college friend had all had cancer. Working with patients with cancer would bring up too many memories and worries to which I would never subject myself.

Some wise soul once said, “If you want to hear God laugh, make plans,” so I got a job in an oncology practice and fell in love with oncology nursing. Whether as a staff nurse on the medical oncology unit, as a case manager for bone marrow transplantation, or as a clinical educator for oncology services, I was home.

Last year, a biopsy for a lesion on my right shin came back malignant. Although squamous cell carcinoma is usually not life-threatening, hearing that you have cancer is a gut punch no matter when, where, or how you hear it. I learned that cancer is scary under all circumstances, and that a cancer diagnosis opens doors to supportive services far better than those available for patients without cancer. For example, I have limited supportive services in my community for those of us with autoimmune diseases. As a person with a cancer diagnosis, I was able to attend a variety of online programs through the local Cancer Support Community.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, despite what I thought were good precautions, I got sick in April 2020 with presumed COVID-19. It felt like nothing I had ever experienced in 61 years, and I was sent to what I affectionately called the “COVID tent” in the parking lot of the local medical center. Despite the rustic nature of the tent, I learned some unforgettable lessons about the power of nursing there.

Dressed in isolation gowns, hats, booties, face shields, masks, and gloves to the point that I could barely see their eyes, a cadre of skilled nurses started to care for me. My provider was a nurse practitioner who was kind and thorough, listened, and admitted that she did not know much about this new virus, but that it was nasty. She sent me home with a pulse oximeter and azithromycin and did my first of many COVID-19 tests. She made me feel better just by her presence.

I learned the importance of touch, even through gloves. Months later, I went to the clinic to see my COVID-19 nurse in person. We were both so happy to see each other that she gave me a hug—the first hug I had received in nine months. That hug was one of the most healing experiences that I have ever had.

Ironically, my COVID-19 tests were negative, but my providers told me that they were seeing false negative test results and that my clinical presentation met with what they knew about COVID-19 at that time. We all learned about it as the days and weeks progressed, and I stayed sick for months. I connected with patient-driven online organizations for patients like me and learned from

other COVID-19 long-haulers, as we were called. Many of us were or are nurses, and we connected to help each other and the non-nurses in the chat room. As a COVID-19 long-hauler, I have learned the importance of connection. When you cannot physically leave your house, the computer screen becomes your connection to others, including your healthcare providers. Connection is perhaps the superpower of nursing.

The nurses who took care of me in that tent kept the connection that is at the heart of nursing. They treated me as a person, not just as a walking, coughing viral repository. All I could see of them was their eyes, and those eyes showed me that I was cared for and that they would keep me safe. That is the power of nursing, and I will always be grateful.

RESOURCES

■ American Organization for Nursing Leadership

Offers a free nursing burnout webinar with strategies to help integrate healthy habits into daily life for greater work–life balance
<https://bit.ly/3gQ3WSD>

■ Emotional PPE Project

Connects healthcare workers in need with licensed mental health professionals who can help for free
<https://bit.ly/3qjAvLZ>

■ Oncology Nursing Society

Provides a nursing self-care learning library with a comprehensive list of resources on finding ways to make time for self-care
<https://bit.ly/35PKDm2>

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