

Someone's Mother

Category: Racism

written by Cynthia Stock | June 2, 2020

I don't know if I'm a racist. I hope not, but I can't be sure.

Decades ago, several years into my ICU nursing career, I started my night shift facing three angry adult daughters of an African American woman. The patient had suffered a horrible head wound. My first awareness of her came from smell, not sight. I recognized the odor of infection and tissue death. Her head was swathed in a turban of furacin-soaked gauze dressing her injury. The daughters rushed at me in a wave of angst. "I think my mother's last nurse was a racist," one of the three said. "She acted like she didn't want to be here or have anything to do with Mom."

I felt gobsmacked. My patient's day nurse was someone I knew as smart and competent. She paid attention to detail and followed through on things. I knew nothing about her sociopolitical bent but had never thought such things mattered in nursing.

In certain circumstances, anger and pain manifest with an almost physical presence; I felt those emotions crowding my patient's room. What could I say to these women contemplating the loss of their mother? What could I say to these daughters trying to offer their mother love and support? What could I say to establish enough trust to give them some peace, even it was just for one shift?

No one had ever before confronted me about racism with such candor and passion. My body trembled. No words seemed adequate to the situation. I stood absolutely still—I can't remember for how long.

"I can't speak for that other nurse," I finally said. "I don't know what went on. I can only promise you that I'll treat your mom as if she were mine."

Then I turned toward the patient, patted her arm and started my assessment.

The daughters watched me touch their mom and talk softly with her. I explained to them my plan of care for the next few hours.

Before I knew it, they had left for the night.

I still don't know if I'm a racist or not.

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