

# Dear Nurse

Category: Stories

written by Catherine Ring Saliba | August 23, 2019

*I was an RN for more than forty years and am now retired. As a recent hospital patient, I documented my experiences. This resulted in a letter to nurses everywhere.*

Dear Nurse,

Please be kind to me. I am frightened, alone and in pain. I am way out of my comfort zone and need every bit of encouragement you have to offer.

I arrived at the emergency room a short while ago, was transferred from the ambulance stretcher to a narrow bed and told that a doctor would see me soon. Curtains were pulled around my little cubicle—for privacy, I assume—but honestly, I do wish they had left a small gap to let me see people, activity, life!

I do have a call bell within reach, thank goodness. For that I'm grateful. I do not, however, have a friend or family member with me for moral support. I didn't want to impose on anyone, but I'm beginning to understand why it's recommended. Example: I could really use a tissue! It doesn't seem important enough for the call bell, but a friend could dash out to get one immediately.

Soon I'll be transferred to a real room. The nurse has popped her head into my cubicle frequently, just to check in and to say hello. I cannot tell you how comforting that small gesture was. ERs are terribly busy places, and since my condition is not critical, I understand the necessity for the long wait. But hey, I'm not feeling all that noble right now.

When I got to my room to be officially admitted, the nurse and a technician (we used to call them "nurse's aides," but these days they're highly trained professionals) and even a doctor were all there, ready to see to my immediate needs. I am so glad that I wasn't left alone during those first few minutes in my room. Being left alone, at least at first, is dreadfully scary, and that feeling of isolation is not good.

I hope that you, as my nurse, will keep me informed as to what will happen next. If it will hurt, I need to know that, too. If the hurting is expected, then I'll know that nothing untoward is happening. When you're going to start an IV, please tell me. When you're going to do any kind of procedure involving me, tell me. If you're giving me medications, let me know what they are and why I'm receiving them. Hopefully my doctor has already spoken to me about this, but I still need your confirmation.

Please introduce yourself. It humanizes you and makes me feel less like a hospital number. Explain how to use the bed controls, the TV and the call bell, and anything else concerning my room, my equipment and the hospital routine. If I'm allowed to walk in the halls, how far can I go? May I use my cellphone? Will my valuables be safe in my room? Who will do what to and for me? In other words, what are the rules around here? I'll behave if I know what's expected.

Please greet me with a smile; if you are grim, I'll assume that my condition is grim. While I'm feeling weak and vulnerable, I'll internalize everything,

even if your frown has less to do with me than with your much-abbreviated lunch break.

Don't be in a hurry, or please at least *try* to give the illusion that you have all the time in the world to spend with me. I know that you really have very little time and so much to do, but when you come into my room, please take the time to sit—yes, sit—and talk with me, if only for a minute. It gives me a feeling of comfort and security, and I'll be less likely to use that call bell frivolously.

Encourage me. Make a big deal out of a small success in my recovery. I need to see progress, even if it seems minuscule in your eyes. We both know that hospitalization is not a celebratory event, but we can find joy in the inch-by-inch victories. Mind and body are so closely connected. Be honest; tell me the bad stuff, but please highlight the good.

If I need others to temporarily take care of my personal needs, like bathing and the old bedpan deal, please let me maintain as much of my dignity as possible. I know that the hospital staff is used to this kind of thing, but I'm not. I need my modesty kept intact, so cover me, please!

Nighttime chattering at the nurses' station is inevitable, but we hospital patients sometimes have trouble sleeping. A lower noise level would be great. Thank you! Nights are especially tough for me as a patient. Being awakened at midnight for the vital-signs check or for medications is intrusive, and I probably need to be reminded of its importance for my well-being and safety. I am sorry to be so grumpy.

Use your skills with authority. I can sense your hesitation or unease. Please don't make me think you're a novice at performing some procedure, even if you are—and if you're having difficulty, please let someone else do it. More than two unsuccessful attempts to start an IV or a catheterization is not cool. Never, ever be lazy about using sterile technique! I know bacteria can thrive in a hospital setting. I also know that many of the little things you do can curtail this. Wash your hands; use gloves; make sure my immediate environment is kept clean, including me. Change my IV and dressings frequently. Yes, I may give a muffled groan or two, but do it anyway.

Please teach me all you can about my condition and the steps needed for my recovery, including medications or equipment, signs and symptoms to watch for, my diet and activity level if they differ from my usual regimen, and any other information that I might find useful. But don't patronize me or lecture—unless I really need and deserve it. For example, if I just had a heart attack and still intend to smoke, then shame on me. Lecture away!

A week has passed, and I've been officially discharged. Today is a happy day! The most important thing that I want to convey is my huge appreciation for you, dear nurse. Your care was superb. You put up with me when I was mentally and physically at my lowest, and I'm sure there might have been a time or two when you saved my life. I come away from this experience stronger, healthier and with much greater awareness. I have a whole new perspective on hospital life and the people who live it day to day—especially you.

Love,

*Your patient*

**About the author:**

Catherine Ring Saliba graduated from the University of Vermont with a BS degree in nursing. The last twenty years of her nursing career were spent on the cardiac unit of Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, in New Brunswick, NJ. Meanwhile, she also acted professionally in movies and commercials, arranging her nursing hours to accommodate that. "It was a wonderful counterbalance to the stress of cardiac nursing. I began writing out of sheer boredom while recovering from surgery and found great joy in the process, and especially in documenting my life experiences for my grandchildren. To my delight and surprise, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* published two of my stories, and magazines such as *Woman's World*, *More*, *Reminisce* and *Good Old Days* followed suit. The *New York Times*' "Forgotten Heroes" column ran a piece I wrote about my father, from whom I learned so much of my work ethic. I am so proud to have been a nurse. I wrote this story to honor nurses everywhere and to remind young, incoming nurses that the human interactions between nurse and patient cannot be minimized or forgotten in this age of amazing and life-saving technological advances in the hospital setting."

**Story editor:**

Diane Guernsey