“At Christmas, making a stand against routine can be enough”

Christmas Eve – and the usual musty odour of boiled cabbage, stale urine and coal tar soap were disguised by the more welcoming aroma of mince pies and custard. The chipped magnolia paint was obscured by well-worn metallic decorations that had clearly done some service and were nearing the end of their working lives. A threadbare artificial Christmas tree was arrayed with fairy lights and paper crackers in a half-hearted effort to introduce a smattering of joy into the day room of the ward.

Older patients sat propped up in their usual posts, in regimented form around the outside of the room, staring at the relentless festive cheer transmitted by the television set that dominated the dismal room.

This was a hospital for older people, and I was on my geriatric placement (as it was known in those days) as a student nurse. The prospect of working Christmas in this dilapidated and depressing place did not fill my heart with Christmas spirit.

I was troubled by the stark contrast between the festivities on this ward and those of my family that I had left behind. Our home would be full of overexcited children stuffed full of sweets and fizzy drinks to sustain them through midnight mass. My parents would be launching a futile campaign for calm in the vain hope they could finish the last-minute present wrapping in peace. There would be music, noise and expectation.

Here at the hospital – apart from some limited Christmas trappings – it could have been any other day. We had decorations and mince pies, Santa hats and carols, but none of these were able to punctuate the routine and make it feel like Christmas.

I was told to put one lady to bed, ready for the night staff. Mrs Jenkins* was engrossed in James Bond. “It’s not Christmas without James Bond,” she said, and I agreed. “Let me go to bed when the film has finished,” she reasonably asked. So I left her enjoying the action.

Sister was not amused and insisted she was put into her bed before the night staff came on duty.

“But it’s Christmas Eve,” I said. “Yes – and the work still needs to be done,” was the mean reply.

I refused to do it in a display of solidarity with this lady. She was put into her bed before the end of the film but at least I had made a stand – a stand for her, a stand for Christmas, and a stand against routine. “At least you had a go, dear,” she said and gave me a Quality Street – a purple one. It was then that Christmas arrived.

I knew then that working over Christmas was never going to have the same Christmas magic of home, but it was special none the less.

The value of nursing lies in the strength of the relationships we build, the opportunity to affect individual lives and the personal rewards that this brings. Mrs Jenkins taught me the thrill of being appreciated, and that, sometimes, it is simply enough to have a go.

* Name changed

Ruth Bailey is a practice nurse, Charter Medical Centre, Hove

---

SPOTLIGHT

Young patients’ opinions should be heard, too

What does an eight-year-old think about their visit to hospital outpatients? Of the waiting room? Did they understand what the doctor was saying? Did they feel they were given enough privacy when they were examined?

Involving patients in their care and encouraging them to report on their experiences is becoming ingrained. Yet the voices of children are rarely heard – except, sometimes, via their parents. But, as our research project on page 18 reveals, children’s views are not always the same as their parents’.

Researchers from the Picker Institute worked with Sheffield Children’s Foundation Trust on a questionnaire for children as young as eight. This gave children a voice and led to changes – entertainment in waiting rooms, a youth worker and better communication of waiting times. All patients need to be heard – not just adults.

Kathryn Godfrey is practice and learning editor of Nursing Times. kathryn.godfrey@emap.com Twitter @GodfreyKathryn

---

HIGHLIGHTS

Developing a safety trigger tool p14

Introducing students to evidence-based practice p21

Giving children a say in their care p18