The ice cream that changed my approach to nursing

As the many demands on nurses continue to increase, Nigel Jopson urges us to remember that it is often the small things that make a huge difference to patients.

When I think about my life in nursing I realise there have been three major incidents that have changed the way in which I think and behave. They may seem insignificant and, at first glance, rather simple and obvious but, as the Changing Practice article that deals with patients’ dignity and quality of care (page 12) shows, small changes can really make a difference.

These three incidents did not help me to meet any targets, they had no discernible and recordable outcome and they certainly did not follow any care process. Nonetheless, I believe they still made major contributions to my patients’ lives both then and now.

The first incident occurred when I was a student and doing a ward round with a consultant. I presented a patient and explained that we were checking her blood pressure twice a day. The consultant asked me why we were doing that; my answer was because such action had been stated upon handover. He asked again why it was being done and then also asked what we were doing about the results. I was not sure and said so. He told me that I should always know why I was doing something and should always ask why. This made a great impact on me and has led me to question many things and ensure that I always know why I am carrying out a particular task.

The next incident happened when I was working in the area of learning disabilities. We decided to go out to the seaside for the day and I was looking after one woman who hardly seemed to react to anything. We walked along, me pushing her wheelchair, and passed behind a shelter that blocked out the sun. As we re-emerged into the sunshine her face lit up and she started smiling and laughing. I realised then that I was judging reactions and responses based on my own expectations and that things she reacted to were very different and at totally different levels. This always reminds me not to impose my expectations on the people with whom I work and to try different methods to help with reactions.

The third incident was also trivial on the surface but a significant learning experience. I was again at the seaside with a group of older people. The woman I was escorting was enjoying herself. We had been to lunch, walked along the seashore, and had stopped for an ice cream. As she sat in her wheelchair in the sunshine eating her cornet, she said: “Do you know, it is years since I did this.” It struck me that, of course, she had not done this for years because she could not do it on her own. It was such a simple thing and one that many of us take for granted – but for her it was extremely special. Once more my thinking about the way in which I helped to look after people changed and I realised that it is not the complicated care processes that make a difference – what really makes a difference to people’s lives are the simple things that we take for granted and that show us that we have choices and some control over our lives.

When I look back and reflect on my life and my nursing career, I can see that the question why, a ray of sunlight and an ice cream changed my attitudes – and am thankful I realised how important they were. These little things have improved my approach to patient care in a way no research, training or imposed targets ever have. I hope they have also helped to improve the lives of the people I have the privilege of looking after. I am sure you have had similar experiences – to share them with others join the discussion on this article at www.nursingtimes.net.

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