Learn from the leadership of the COVID-19 healthcare workers

By Dawn Z. Hodges, Ph.D.

On Dec. 17, 2020, I woke up with a tickle in my throat. Later it became a cough. I took cough syrup. By the weekend, I had cold-like symptoms and began taking medicine for cold and flu. On Monday I was nauseated; I took Pepto-Bismol. I lay on the couch getting sicker and sicker. I tried to drink juice or ginger ale, but could keep nothing down. I canceled Christmas dinner with my son and his family. By Christmas Day, I'd lost 15 pounds.

The day after Christmas, I was in the emergency room being diagnosed with COVID-19 pneumonia. I spent 10 days on a 36-patient isolation ward. I'm not sure why, after a year of living in a world of a pandemic, staying home, wearing masks in public, and social distancing, with all the illnesses, hospitalizations, and death, it just didn't occur to me I would become very ill with the virus. I was sicker than I've ever been in my life. Actually, it was my first hospitalization.

When I arrived on the sixth floor, I had a fever of 103.6. I was a wet noodle in terms of energy. My Saturday evening shift nurse just took charge. I wasn't in a position to argue, but I also wasn't afraid.

Intuitively I knew I was in good hands. Immediately she began measures to break my fever; with a display of confidence and experience, she tried several methods. When I couldn't keep any fever-reducing meds in my body, she packed ice bags all around me. By the end of her shift, my fever had dropped to under 101. I remember her giving a high-five to the patient care technician and saying, "Now that's what I'm talkin' about!" I never saw her again.

Every 12 hours, my nurse and PCT changed. I spent 18 shifts in room 623. I rarely had the same nurse or PCT. But every one of them treated me like I was a VIP (very important patient). Each one of them made me feel special. I never doubted their authority or competence.

Every shift, the nurses came to my room with pills, shots, and IV meds; they explained to me what they were and how they were to be administered. They took a leadership and teaching role in my healing. They made me feel comfortable with my medical treatments.

Twice during the week, a radiologic technician came into my room with what looked like a small tractor to take x-rays of my lungs. Respiratory therapists and technicians came in my room on several occasions to check out my oxygen tubes and breathing capabilities. And of course, every day my doctor, or one of her colleagues, would visit me, leaving

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a flurry of orders for the nurses and others to implement.

Every person I met in the hospital treated me in a professional but caring manner. I asked the nurses how long they'd been a nurse. I had several with years of experience. I had nurses who were in their first year of nursing. All they knew was COVID-19. They had a patient load of six. Every time they came into a patient room, they had to don new personal protective equipment.

Upon leaving the room, they had to throw it away and change PPE before entering the next patient's room. When nurses came into my room, they came with hands full of meds and needles. If the PCTs came to help with a bath or to change the bedding, they came in with a pile of towels, sheets, gowns, socks. They all came well prepared so they didn't have to go out to retrieve other items.

Throughout my stay in the isolation ward, I felt better each day. I was very happy on the 10th day when the doctor told me I could go home that day, without taking oxygen. My nurse came in later with 17 pages of discharge papers; what could have seemed overwhelming was made possible because she took the time to discuss each directive with me. A PCT put me in a wheelchair, covered me with a sheet, and rolled me out to the vehicle where my husband was waiting.

I tell you my personal story to say that all of us who have had any hand in educating and training healthcare workers can be proud. Many of them are the leaders of today and tomorrow. They work in the most difficult of circumstances and have for a year now; they do it with grace and kindness. I, for one, have great faith in the future of these amazing healthcare professionals. ■