



Benton
Hospice
Service

MORE THAN JUST A BATH LADY

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“When’s the bath lady coming?” my patient asks.

“The Home Health Aide will be here at 11,” I reply, emphasizing the title. “She’s much more than a bath lady.”

My patient agrees. “I’ve found that out. She really cares, doesn’t she? And she seems to know just what I need to have done. She even brings me fresh fruit from her garden sometimes. She’s always so perky and bright...” I concur with him, expressing my gratitude for what these special women do for our patients and their families.

While their job description focuses primarily on providing personal hygiene, like bathing and washing hair, they also do light housekeeping and provide a compassionate ear. The intimacy of bathing can be a time when patients talk about concerns they don’t share with their families or even with other team members.

Sometimes home health aides make dramatic differences in a patient’s life. Last year, we served Spec, a self-proclaimed “loner,” who, at 88, accepted hospice care with remarkable resistance. Initially, he allowed us to visit for five minutes, then promptly dismissed us: “You can go now.” Rhonda, his home health aide, and I both discovered that beneath his rough exterior was a very lonely man with low self-esteem. For months, once a week, Rhonda just sat with him before he ever allowed her to assist him with any care. Eventually, he let her shave him. Finally, after seven months, he decided he would take a shower. Now Spec hadn’t had a full shower in some time, having kept himself clean with sponge baths. This was a major step. “The shower is so...wet,” he wryly observed. But Rhonda had won his trust through the many hours of sitting and talking, of hearing the story of his daughter’s death that had broken his heart, of bringing him a pork chop when he let it slip that he liked them, of teasing him and accepting his teasing in return.

One day Spec told me, “You guys care more about me than I do.” “Perhaps,” I answered, “but your not caring won’t stop us from caring.” We enjoyed the challenge of building trust with him. When Spec reached his 89th birthday, we surprised him with a cake, balloons, and presents. He rewarded us with a tearful smile. And when he was dying, Spec realized that he was loved despite his attempts to push us away. He died knowing that strangers had become family for him.

While this story is more pronounced than some, it is not unique. Home health aides touch patients’ and caregivers’ lives in deep and subtle ways. We are fortunate to have competent, caring women in this role who regard their work as more than “just a job.”

When asked what she values most about her role on the hospice team, Candy Bell replied, “The more personal level of relationship that I get with my patients is rewarding. There are things our patients will tell me, but not the nurse. They seem to trust us.”

Mary Beth Seida explained, “It’s the vulnerability—people are at their most vulnerable at this time, and they want you to be honest with them. This is the most honest, rewarding, meaningful work you can ever do. I believe it is my gift to be there. And you have a chance to make a difference.”

Rhonda McElroy added, “I love the flexibility I have to serve our patients in the way that best fits each individual and their family. I am blessed every day to meet amazing people in the most difficult possible circumstances. I am honored to be in their lives and help them, and to learn from each and every one. I feel I get so much more than I could ever give.”

Reflected here are the commitment and gratitude our team members have for the opportunities we are given in this work, and a glimpse at why the team works well. As the home health aides’ supervisor and colleague, I feel blessed to work with each of them. Each of the nurses can tell you many more stories of how the home health aides have made the difference in negotiating challenging circumstances in a case. They are definitely much more than just the “bath ladies.”