

A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE NURSING SHORTAGE

By Caroline C. Nguyen. From Irvine, Calif.

My life changed forever in the summer of 1996. My father was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. The news created a massive earthquake in our household. At first, I didn't know what to expect or how to act. I knew one thing for certain: I wanted to spend as much time as possible with my father. I wanted to be the strong one for our family, even though I was only 16 years old. About a month after his diagnosis, the cancer began to take its effect on my father's outward appearance and physical capabilities. I went to school and failed to tell people my news because I didn't want to be pitied and also because school offered an escape for me. When I came home, I took on the responsibility of helping my father around the house. Both my mother and brother had to work during the day, and it was vital for me to be there for him.

In September, my father became an entirely different person. He lost 45 pounds and lost the use of his legs. Our house became a hospital with a wheel chair, hospital bed, oxygen masks, portable toilet, liquid foods, and everything else foreign to me. These things made life easier for my dad. He needed constant care, and I no longer felt it was a responsibility to be there for him; I chose to be there for him.

My father was supposed to live for 6 months but lived only for 3. He died slowly in the intensive care unit (ICU) at a small community hospital. Our whole family was there, and I will never forget the moment when he left our presence. Minute by minute, his breaths grew farther and farther apart. His face was expressionless, but I knew he felt us there. My mother and I were at the head of the bed. I had one arm around my mother's waist and used the other to hold my father's cold bony hands. What eases the

pain of his lingering departure was that it was smooth and painless. At 9:26 PM, on the night of my 17th birthday, my father took his last breath. A second lasted an eternity. My brother was keeping track of his faint heartbeat. At 9:29 PM, everything stopped.

Seven years have passed since that day, and I still wonder how I managed to make sense of it all. Even today, I wonder how this could have happened to me. What I remember so vividly from my father's last days was the support I felt from the nurses caring for him in the adult ICU. The critical care nurses helped me navigate the hospital, a world so new to me at the time. They spent time discussing my father's illness with me, explaining his medications for pain, and listening to my concerns. I felt that they cared for me and for my father as though we were a part of their family. Most importantly, when I felt the need to be strong in front of everyone else, including my family, friends, and schoolmates, they allowed me to be human. They allowed me to cry and deal with the pain of my loss. They allowed me to seek support from others. They took away the guilt I felt in mourning. I will be forever grateful to them.

Today, as a nursing student, I am saddened that the nursing shortage is much more pronounced for critical care nursing. According to the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, the greatest need for nurses is in the most specialized areas, including adult, pediatric, and neonatal ICUs. Although critical care nursing may not appeal to everyone, I hope more people consider it as a career. It is daunting to think that the nursing shortage has an effect on all our lives and that our own children may have less support if dealt the experience of caring for a loved one in the ICU.

Caroline C. Nguyen completed her first year in the masters entry program in nursing at the University of California, San Francisco. Before returning to school for a masters degree in nursing, she will work as a new graduate RN in the neonatal intensive care unit at Miller Children's Hospital in Long Beach, Calif.

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