

'There's a lot of sadness, but a lot of joy'

Nurses reflect on trials, triumphs

BY CORTNEY CASEY
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Sue Mooney Smith doesn't recall much about the day a mother, distraught over her son's head injury, funneled her emotions into harsh words for Mooney Smith, the boy's nurse.

Over the years, she had come to accept the fact that, under the strain of grief and anxiety, patients' families sometimes lash out as a method of coping.

But Mooney Smith vividly remembers when, eight years later, the mother returned to the hospital to apologize, express her gratitude and proudly re-introduce her son — now grown and completely healthy, married with two children.

It's a moment Mooney Smith will never forget, a bright spot among the exhilarating highs and crushing lows of nursing.

"There's a lot of sadness, but a lot of joy," said Mooney Smith, administrative director of patient care services for St. John North Shores Hospital in Harrison Township. "You can be part of another human being's biggest highs if you're involved in the delivery of a baby or other positives, but you can also be there at the very lowest point where somebody's dying or somebody's disabled."

The relationships that develop from nurses' interactions with patients are the greatest rewards for a challenging job, said Maria Strom, chief nursing officer at St. John Macomb and St. John Oakland hospitals.

"Patients come and go, and we're just a moment in time for them," she said. "But it does matter what goes on in that brief moment in time with us; we can make or break their satisfaction while they're patients."

On the oncology floor at Royal Oak Beaumont Hospital, nurse Nicole Napolitano said the often long-term stays of her patients facilitate the formation of even deeper bonds. But with the close ties often comes heartache.

"It's really hard, especially working with cancer patients; you don't always get the results that you want," she said. "It's one of the most difficult things. You become so close with them, and then they end up not surviving."

The three women came upon nursing in different ways. Mooney Smith became interested in the field during college after determining that she enjoyed the math, science and psychology that went along with it.

Strom decided at age 12, after briefly considering teaching, to pursue nursing. Thirty-five years later, she has no regrets.

"When God plants that seed and you follow it, it's a lucky thing," she said.

Entering college, Napolitano knew she wanted to help others. Always the "caregiver" in

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her family, she decided to pursue nursing after a year of business classes left her unsatisfied.

She had no idea how demanding the studies would be, with 12-hour unpaid shifts paired with regular schoolwork. Even more daunting was the responsibility of having patients' lives in her hands.

"Every choice and every decision I make is my own judgment call," she said. "I think that's one thing that school never prepared you for."

Napolitano said the struggles are worth it. It's gratifying to have "a patient telling you that you taking care of them or you being with them at that part of their life made a difference."

Nursing's next generation

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, the nation's 2.4 million registered nurses represent the largest health care-related occupation.

And that number is likely to grow: RNs, according to the BLS, are projected to create the second largest number of new jobs among all occupations, with opportunities in the majority of specialties and settings "expected to be excellent."

With a large contingent of the nation's nurses approaching retirement, Strom said a major concern is attracting the next generation.

"I think people by now have gotten wind of the fact that in about 2010-2012, there's an expected retirement of a lot of the baby boomers," she said. "That's a huge percentage of the nursing workforce. We really want and need to build up our forces."

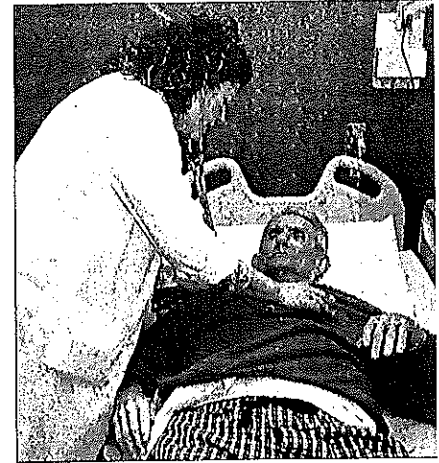
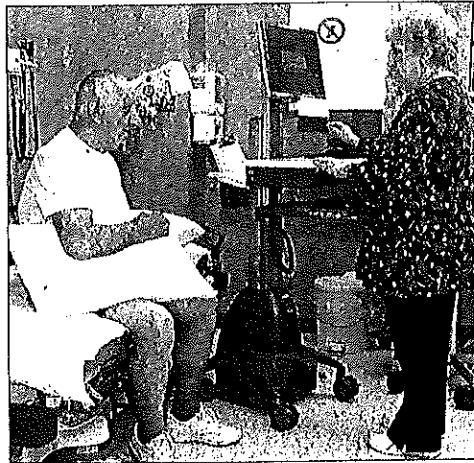
Mooney Smith said many departing nurses are simply unable to keep up with the physical demands of the job — long hours of standing, running down halls and moving patients.

"We're going into a big nursing shortage, and part of the reason is, all of the seasoned nurses are getting older," she said. "Nurses are retiring not so much because they want to retire, but because they physically can't do the manual labor anymore."

The shortage, said Strom, is a potential obstacle, but also a chance to show young or even middle-aged people seeking second careers what nursing has to offer. It's flexible and "very portable," she said.

But Mooney Smith said she fears that the promise of a guaranteed job may draw people who otherwise may not be suited for nursing. She emphasized that the career requires math and science proficiency, critical thinking, listening and organizational skills, patience, empathy and compassion, and a willingness to work in sometimes unpleasant situations.

"It's tough work. It can be very sad work," she said. "It really has to be more of a calling than just a job."



Thanks for caring

Each year, Nurses' Week — which begins May 6 and ends May 12, on Florence Nightingale's birthday — celebrates nurses' commitment and dedication.

"It's our way of saying 'thank you' for the tireless efforts we give to our patients and our families," said Valerie Gibson, vice president of patient care and service for DMC-Harper and

Hutzel hospitals, where the week will be marked with a celebratory luncheon, inservices and presentations.

Gibson said the week helps recognize how much nurses give of themselves through their work.

"We care for the individual when they're at their most vulnerable," she said. "It's a demanding position, but also a rewarding one," she said. "We're at the bedside, 24-seven, 365."

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Left: Nurse Linda Rich walks with patient Emma Jelsch of Detroit at St. John North Shores Hospital in Harrison Township. Nurses will be recognized during upcoming Nurses' Week, May 6-12. Bottom left: Nurse JoAnne Haas retrieves patient history from Harrison Township resident Phil Greco. Bottom right: Nurse practitioner Carla Shock listens to the heart of Clinton Township resident Gerald Frederick.

Photos by Deb Jacques

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