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Hailey Sellek
Parkland College

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Hailey Sellek
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I chose to satisfy the service learning project requirement by volunteering at Carle Hospital once a week for three hours at a time. My shift was on Tuesday afternoons from 12:00pm-3:00pm. For each shift students are expected to dress appropriately and professionally while keeping in mind their surroundings and duties. For example, a favorite blouse, best outfit for church, or stilettos are not recommended to be worn. Student volunteers are on their feet for the entirety of their shifts and run the risk of coming into contact with bodily fluids of patients. Close-toed shoes are required, and tennis shoes are recommended, for the safety and comfort of the student. Individuals with long hair should keep it pulled back with a hair tie or pin and makeup and jewelry are to be kept simple. Even before leaving home, students had to think about these things so as to be prepared for a shift later in the day.

Upon arriving to the hospital, I parked in the employee parking lot and walked towards the University Street entrance. In order to keep track of volunteer timeliness, hours, and attendance, we were to log into a computer before starting our shifts. Then I would pin my nametag to my shirt and take the three flights of stairs to my third floor unit.

I chose to volunteer in the inpatient oncology unit at Carle, which is located in the Parkview tower. The unit contains eleven inpatient rooms with twelve beds available for use. Three of the rooms have special ventilation systems for patients whose immune systems are suppressed to the point where breathing the air coming in from the hallway poses a potential threat. Where air normally comes into a room underneath or through a door, the ventilation

system creates the opposite effect: air from the patient's room flows out to the hallway. An outpatient room is used for patients who are not staying in the hospital but require treatment that could take hours to administer. Family members and friends find comfort in the visitor's lounge in the hallway between the elevator and the unit.

Oncology is the study of cancer in the body, so all of the patients residing in the oncology unit are victims of cancer awaiting further diagnosis or undergoing treatment, such as radiation. Because many patients receiving treatment for cancer are immunosuppressed, it is absolutely crucial that volunteers practice good hygiene and hand washing techniques.

All volunteers are given duties to perform during shifts. Some of my duties included removing empty or finished meal trays from patient rooms, filling water cups, aiding nurses, tidying and sanitizing the unit, stocking patient closets, and visiting with patients. Although each task has a purpose, the most important task in the volunteer program is visiting with patients. Many students looking for volunteer hours and experience in a hospital plan to enter into work in the medical field at some point in their professional careers. For this reason, it is important students learn from an early age how to converse with patients and develop a desirable bedside manner. Also, many doctors and nurses stay busy with giving care, so they do not regularly have the time to sit with a patient to keep him or her company. That is where the volunteer comes in. The program is set up so volunteers have the time and availability to give personal attention to patients that the doctors and nurses are often incapable of giving.

In conversing with patients there are expectations and limitations. Because volunteers are not trained professionals, we are not to discuss any healthcare-related topics with patients. Healthcare topics are protected by confidentiality through HIPAA, and we can't run the risk of incorrect advisement. What we as volunteers are expected to do is converse lightly about topics

that might help to distract patients from their current health or care. Patients deeply appreciate hearing about the busy lives of students outside of the hospital. They also enjoy it when the student volunteers share openly about their lives. It's a way for patients to avoid being at the center of a conversation and to hear about the world they can't be a part of due to their care.

I have learned a tremendous amount of practical information as well as life lessons I can take with me and use in my future medical career. I am studying to attain my medical degree in hopes of working as a physician in the medical field someday. I specifically chose to volunteer in oncology because it is an area in which I hope to spend more time studying in the years to come. I have a large passion for people afflicted with cancer, especially children.

Practical information attained includes administrative work, care-giving, hygiene, and general medical standards found in healthcare settings throughout the country. As a volunteer I was given the opportunity to see the hierarchical set-up of a typical hospital unit from the outside of the system. I gleaned information about various techniques and common courtesy for preserving the privacy of patients. Although I could not administer care, I often aided nurses in moving patients and was able to watch some of the things nursing and tech staff did. In sanitizing the floor, I learned valuable information about the common places for bacteria to multiply as well as preventative measures both visitors and patients can take to guard against future infection.

The life lessons in this volunteer experience were abundant. Not only are they valuable for life in general, but can be used in the future as I pursue a career in health care. Some of the lessons I learned deserving emphasis are that sick patients are people too, smiles and humor and easy conversation mean more than what meets the eye, even mundane tasks carry a purpose, and

that death is an imminent part of life. By learning these lessons first-hand early in my experience, I will be able to provide better healthcare to my own patients someday.

Every day a student volunteer starts his or her shift, he knows that he will come into contact with at least half a dozen ill patients. Each ill patient will be different: old, young, newly admitted, nearing discharge, seeking hospice and palliative care, going into remission, and much more. With all of the diagnoses and tubes, many young people require much time becoming accustomed to being around the ill, whether it is due to fear or uncertainty. It is often difficult to remember that each ill patient also has a name and story that makes him or her unique. Sick patients are people too; they have families, homes, pets, a past, and hope for a future. These ill patients are simply people who had the sad misfortune of being diagnosed with a potentially life-threatening illness. Being able to look past an illness without ignoring it is a valuable skill in the healthcare world. While it may be hard to see past their current situation, it is important for caregivers, volunteers, and patients alike to remember that the humans lying in the hospital beds are just that: human beings.

As a volunteer's main purpose is to carry light conversation with patients, it is a task of importance. In our lives, we have the capability of holding dozens of short, light conversations every single day. In a hospital setting, this is not the case. Patients are often confined to rooms waiting for loved ones to visit or call. Their only outside contact might be the visit of a nurse, health care tech, or doctor, all of whom have one thing in mind: how ill the patient is. Over time, this can wear down an individual's morale. As a volunteer I had the gift of time. Giving a patient a conversation, smile, or humorous comment could make all the difference in his or her day. They appreciate being able to genuinely laugh about your mother setting the fire alarm off with the stove at suppertime last night or hearing the intense action of your sister's varsity

basketball game over the weekend. We take these events and stories for granted, but they mean a great deal to those who can't indulge in them. Also, smiles are contagious. Walking into a room and greeting a patient all while wearing a genuine smile often ended with a smile on that patient's face, too. At the end of the day, this small gesture becomes an irreplaceable gift.

Some of the tasks on the volunteer task sheet seem mundane and pointless upon first glance. How in the world could sanitizing the unit or disposing of finished meal trays contribute to improving a patient's care or expanding my experience in the hospital? In reality, every small task a volunteer performs allows the nursing staff to focus more on care. By allowing nurses to work without small distractions, a patient's care is greatly improved. By performing the seemingly mundane tasks, a student volunteer is forced to explore the unit and enter patient rooms. Depending on how seriously or genuinely volunteers perform duties, exploring the unit and entering patient rooms will increase your knowledge and experience much more than previously expected.

The most important lesson I learned is that death is an imminent part of life. Each patient who is admitted to the unit is there for a reason. An illness has interrupted his or her life, requiring the need for medical attention. As a health care provider, you hold out the same hope for each person that he or she will leave with the new chance for life as it was before the cancer. Not all patients who check into the hospital will leave with an improved health status, though. Some men and women leave worsened by symptoms of treatment or simply a disease that is too aggressive to control. This is a lesson you learn quickly and, if not prepared for it, can be very disheartening. I became well-acquainted with a man over the span of a few weeks early in the semester. Each shift I could spend hours talking to him about his life, his philosophies, his experiences, and in turn talk about myself. Later on in the season, following his discharge from

the hospital, I saw his obituary in the newspaper. This was my first experience with losing a patient, and one that I will not soon forget. I was under the assumption he would simply get better and go home to continue living his life. What I hadn't taken into consideration was the exact opposite: he could die. Although it is a morbid lesson, it is pertinent in healthcare, especially in careers dealing with terminal illness. Always treat patients with the same kind of high hopes, but remember each possible outcome.

In volunteering at Carle I learned a plethora of lessons, had fun, met new people, and expanded my experience in a health care setting. I look forward to pursuing more opportunities similar to this when I transfer. Additionally, I am excited about having the chance one day to put the lessons into practice with my own patients in addition to passing them on to young, ambitious students.