A Personal View of Waiting

Opening Doors to Understanding

A Profile for Staff & Volunteers

SUNNYBROOK & WOMEN'S
Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Sciences Centre
Waiting is a universal lived experience. We all experience waiting—for a bus, or a meal at a restaurant, or news from home, or the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one. In hospital, waiting is identified as important to quality of life for patients and for family members. Patients may be waiting for a diagnosis, or for pain medication, or for assistance to go to the bathroom. Family members have described the anguish of waiting for news of a loved one admitted to critical care.

Nurses and other staff have a lot of influence when it comes to how we help or hinder people when they have to wait. Staff have also identified their own frustrations with asking patients and families to wait—staff know how hard it is for people who are ill and often frightened. Staff also find it frustrating to be unable to provide the quality of care they would like to provide. Asking people to wait and not being able to deliver quality care are major reasons why staff leave the healthcare professionals.

Waiting is important to us all, and understanding what it is like for people to have to wait, can help us to be more tolerant and helpful when frustrations are brewing. Research has helped enhance understanding, and research findings help to tell the story described below. It is hoped that Sam’s story will help staff at Sunnybrook &Women’s to reach out to patients, family and colleagues in order to ease the frustration and uncertainty of waiting.

Sam’s Story

Sam lives in long term care. He recounts his experience of waiting to get back to bed one time when he was in a lot of pain. He had been sitting up for the entire morning and was in a lot of distress. For some reason staff were not hearing his calls for help. He remembers thinking: “I can’t wait any longer. This pain is too great. I am going to go out of my mind. I can’t stand it. Doesn’t anyone understand, I can hardly stand this!” Sam said that having
to wait created a growing tension within him. He felt as though he was going to explode - like a tempest in a teapot. His initial feelings of frustration turned into anger and then almost panic as he felt as though he was losing control. The pain was taking over and he knew he had to rely on staff to help him back to bed. He needed to relieve the pressure on his back so he could get relief and regain control. He asked himself, “Why isn’t anyone listening to how much pain I am in? Why aren’t they running to help? Are they mad at me? Did I do something wrong? Was I cut off? Why is everyone and everything moving in slow motion?” Every second felt like an eternity to Sam and he said he felt inferior, unwanted, and as if he was being ignored.

Sam tried to distract himself by listening to the music he had playing in his room. The music soothed him and helped him to clam down a bit. Creating a sense of calm changed things for Sam and he found he was gaining control of his panic. He remembered making a choice to stay calm while waiting for some relief from his terrible pain. Sam remembers telling himself to stay calm and find some patience. He recalled other times of waiting. He had to wait for many things during his time at army camp, and it was there that he learned patience. He thought about how he had learned to wait and to let it go at that. It was part of life, and sometimes you just have to accept it. Sam said he learned to be still, to take advantage of the time he had while he waited, and to be more patient.

It helped so much when Sam’s nurse came in. She explained that one of the residents down the hall had fallen and she had to assist. She apologized for making him wait. Her attitude of concern made all the difference, and it relieved the panic and fear of being left alone to suffer. Just knowing that the nurse was listening made Sam feel valuable and listened to; it somehow lessened the pain. When she said she was going to be back with someone to help her assist Sam back to bed, she did. Sam felt he could count on her.
Sam recalled the nurse asking him what it was like to wait and what helped him to get through. Sam said it was difficult to wait and that if someone would have just answered the call bell to tell him what was going on and how long he could expect to wait he wouldn’t have felt so helpless and ignored. Focusing on the music and picturing himself at the cottage where he used to spend summers also helped. Most importantly, knowing that the nurse was not far and that she was concerned helped reduce his fear; he knew that help was within reach.

**Things that Help When Having to Wait**

- Answer call bells as promptly as possible even if you are unable to help in that moment; at least the person feels he or she is being acknowledged and heard.
- Keep persons informed about what is going on and what they can expect with respect to waiting for care.
- Avoid making promises regarding specific times if these promises cannot be kept. If you promise to be right back find some way to get there. Be honest—people are more understanding when they know what is going on.
- Listen to people’s concerns, anger, and frustrations about having to wait. It helps to be able to talk about it and to be listened to.
- Explore what helps people when having to wait. They might come up with helpful ideas they had not thought of before.
- Waiting is part of life and sometimes all you can change is your attitude or outlook about having to wait. But if there is any way to help people who are waiting it really makes a difference. The single greatest thing after trying to eliminate waiting is to listen to the person and respect the reality that it is a frustrating experience.

*This story was written based on personal experience, the literature, and a research study on the experience of waiting for persons living in long term care which was funded by the Collaborative Research Program – Long Term Care. From the Office of the Chief Nursing Officer October 2000*