

Frontline

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tient die alone. Especially during COVID, when friends and family cannot be put on a ventilator.

Back in 1899, the Hippocratic Oath of ethics, historically taken by physicians, was modified by nursing champion Lystra E. Greter and her committee, to focus on faithfully practicing the nursing profession as dedicated advocates of the patient. The pledge was later named the Florence Nightingale Pledge in honor of the legendary founder of modern nursing.

The pledge doesn't say anything about a pandemic. Yet, for more than 18 months, COVID has required nurses to go above and beyond their commitment to care, to work long hours behind layers of personal protective equipment (PPE), to put their faces aside, to marshal stress into motivation, and care for patients who might not make it.

At the end of their shift, nurses shed their scrubs and their sadness before entering their homes to focus on their families. And somehow, regroup, so they can return to the hospital for their next shift.

"Working in ICU," said Guerrero, "we deal a lot in death and dying, and end-of-life situations. If there's nothing medically we can do, we want to help patients pass as comfortably as possible, and support their families. During COVID, the biggest challenge has been to keep the patient safe. A lot of time, the pa-

tient is no longer conscious and aware, but their families are, and that has been so painful for them not to be there."

Guerrero remembers one patient, struggling to breathe, who was about to be put on a ventilator. The patient kept trying to phone her daughter but couldn't manage it. Guerrero asked if she could help.

"I told her daughter, 'Talk to your mom; she can hear you. We're going to sedate her, so talk now.' This makes me cry. Having to connect families by phone at such a crucial moment is hard."

Guerrero, who has been a nurse for 21 years, knew before she finished high school that this was her passionate pursuit. As a child, she wore a nurse's uniform for Halloween. The Seaside High School graduate earned her AA and nursing degrees from Monterey Peninsula College before going on to achieve her Bachelor of Science in nursing.

Coming to terms with COVID care

Shannon Gamble, RN, is a caregiver. It's not just what she does; it's who she is. The ICU nurse, who has worked at Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula since 1992, can't imagine stepping away from the identity she carries at her core. Yet the



While working in the COVID isolation tent outside the ER, Jennifer Ruiz had to isolate from her family, which wasn't easy for the single mom of a 6-year-old son.

stress of caring for COVID patients, she says, is like nothing she's ever experienced. "It's not turmoil," she said. "It's more like a deep dread that I'm going to see and be part of someone's struggle whose outcome, no matter what we do, won't be successful."

As an ICU nurse, says Gamble, it is her job to deal with people who are at death's door. Yet, the majority of the time, they make it and don't have to open that door.

"Especially since this has happened, she says, many times during the past 18 months. Gamble acknowledges the fear she and her coworkers experienced when COVID was new and largely undefined. And she was barraged with all kinds of information and recommendations, much of which was constantly

Waiting to exhale

When Matt Baiz, RN, arrives at Community Hospital for his shift in the ER, he takes a final few deep breaths before he exits his car, walks into the hospital, and slips into the anonymity of personal protective equipment, including an N95 mask and eye shield.

"We approach our work with a commitment to care," he said, "but we also carry an underlying fear because we don't know who has what virus. Before COVID, we knew how to handle the flu based on how the patient presented. COVID has so many signs and symptoms, and everyone who comes in with shortness of breath is a potential risk. There is such fatigue in constantly wearing PPE and dealing with potential exposure."

Baiz recognizes that patient time in the ICU is longer than in the ER, where his goal is to stabilize patients and get them to further care. In the ER, he says, he doesn't have the stretch of many nights and extended interaction with patients and their family members.

"We have patients for a few hours, during which, we do the best we can, spending time with them and offering comfort to them and their family. It is a very different experience than in the ICU."

What gets Baiz through his long shifts is the faith that he's doing everything he can to care for his patients, plus the camaraderie among coworkers. "When it's been a busy or demanding night and I'm working under intense circumstances," he said,

"it's my coworkers who get me through. We have each other's backs and do everything to protect each other. This is a huge aspect of keeping us working and well."

In this together

If Jennifer Ruiz, RN, had one word to describe her experience as an ER nurse at SVMHS during COVID, it would be "isolating."

"While working in the COVID isolation tent outside the ER, she had to isolate from her family, which wasn't easy for the single mom of a 6-year-old son. "When we started taking care of COVID patients," she said, "it was impossible to fully isolate from my child, but I sat on the opposite end of the couch, not embracing him or giving him hugs and kisses. The fear of being contagious and passing COVID to my son created constant stress."

For a year, Ruiz worked 12-hour shifts, three days a week, and then regrouped to facilitate "Zoom school," serving as teacher, mom, and best buddy for her son. While she navigated it all, she wasn't left with much time for herself.

"A year later, we still see a high volume of COVID patients," she said, "along with every other issue we take care of in the ER. It's hard to provide the level of care we feel our patients need and deserve, but we have to find a way. Sometimes I feel like I'm treading water, trying to keep moving while preserving just enough energy to go the distance. What keeps us afloat is teamwork and camaraderie. We're all in this together."

Gratitude

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tially had been concerned about whether such a new nurse could care for herself and her child.

"That letter earned Heraz the DAISY Award. "I created a good connection with the mother and was able to reassure her," Heraz said. "A lot of what her baby needed was

my first-time experience, but everything went well, and I'm glad she appreciated what I was able to do for her."

"DAISY" is an acronym, which stands for "Dis-eases Attacking the Immune System." The Daisy Foundation was established by her father, Patrick Barnes, a 33-year-old brand-new father, who contracted a sudden autoimmune disease in late 1999, which warranted hospital-

ization for eight weeks before he died. The family was so moved by the level of compassionate nursing care he received that they established this now-international award.

"We were awed by the way the nurses touched Pat and spoke with him," wrote his father, Mark Barnes, from Washington State. "Even when he was on a ventilator and totally sedated. The way they informed and educated us eased our minds. They truly helped us through the darkest hours of our lives, with soft voices of hope and strong loving hugs that to this day, we still feel."

An important goal behind the DAISY Award, reports the foundation, is to change culture through recognition. Nurses typically respond to gratitude by saying, "I didn't do anything special." Yet grateful patients and their families might disagree, calling care which nurses provide, particularly during the pandemic, extraordinary — and essential.

Natural-born caregiver

Heraz has wanted to be a nurse for as long as she can remember. Born at SVMHS and raised in Soledad, she recalls, as a little girl, carrying around a toy doctor's kit, putting Band-Aids on family members and watching medical shows on TV with her mom.

After graduating from high school, she achieved her associate degree from Hartnell College and then completed the Certified Nursing Assistant program through a continuation high school, while awaiting acceptance into the nursing program at SVMHS. After commencing as a registered nurse in 2019, Heraz went to work in the mother-baby room at SVMHS.

One month after her orientation, she gave birth, at SVMHS, to her first child. When she returned to work following maternity leave, COVID had transformed hospital procedures and nursing protocols. Although she now had to provide patient care from behind the anonymity of personal protective equipment, the pandemic only heightened Heraz's commitment to providing compassionate care.

"Providing care to mothers and babies is what I've been working toward my whole life," she said. "And now I have firsthand experience with my own baby. I've been there, so I know what mothers are feeling, and the hardships and happiness that come with labor and delivery. We always wonder if we make an impact on our patients' lives. I guess we do."

Accompanying the Daisy Award is "The Healer's Touch," a carved statuette symbolizing the relationship among patients, nurses, and families. Each

serpentine stone sculpture, hand-carved by artists of the Shona Tribe in Zimbabwe, carries the respect the Shona people of their trust in their healers. The DAISY Foundation annually imports thousands of these sculptures to be presented to DAISY Award recipients at SVMHS.

Heraz keeps hers close, as a symbol and reminder of her mission of patient care.

A symbol and reminder

DJ Guyton was working in the corporate world while raising three children as a single mom when someone suggested she become a nurse. Worn out by her work, she sensed the satisfaction in the idea and became a nurse. She has since achieved her master's degree in nursing.

Going into her sixth year of nursing at Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula, Guyton recognizes that an area of medicine barely explored during her training was patient care during a pandemic.

"At the beginning of COVID," she said, "we didn't know anything. It was traumatic, not knowing whether our PPE would work and how to avoid carrying COVID home to our families."

A year and a half later, she says, the fear has lessened. She's confident the vaccine will protect her from getting very sick, which enables her to focus on her patients, primarily making sure they can breathe.

"We hang onto hope and do anything and everything we can to keep from sending our patients into the ICU. We stay on watch, staring at their oxygen status, praying that it stays constant, and the numbers don't drop. Our priority and our goal is to keep our pa-

tients alive, help them get well and help them talk to their family."

It's less of a priority to make sure a hot meal arrives right on time, she says, when we are trying to keep everyone breathing.

This kind of vigilance and devotion is what earned Guyton Community Hospital's first DAISY Award, along with Tong Higgins, RN, having been nominated by another nurse, a patient, recovering from COVID, herself.

"Even though I am familiar with COVID and the process of it," wrote the patient in her nomination, "going through it myself was one of the scariest experiences of my life. I was blessed to have DJ as my nurse. She held my hand through the scary parts, calmed my fears, talked to my mom when I physically couldn't stay by my side, and made it bearable. I truly believed she saved my life that day."

The day Guyton received her award, she was having a rough morning. Her father wasn't well, and she was worried. Her department barely explored during her training was patient care during a pandemic.

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Early Deadlines Apply
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All obituaries must be created on line by visiting the following website: www.bayareabits.com
Please note early submission deadlines to ensure your notice publishes on desired date(s).
Friday, October 8th
Notices placed BEFORE 1:00 p.m. can be published on or after Saturday, October 9th.
Notices placed AFTER 1:00 p.m. can be published on or after Tuesday, October 12th.
Regular obituary deadlines will resume on Tuesday, October 12th (1:00 p.m. to publish the following day)
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