

Letter to the Editor

It is from a Nurse Unit Manager's perspective that I write this letter to you today amidst the unavoidable peak that we are facing in our battle against the COVID-19 pandemic currently ravaging our country and stretching our already limited nursing capacity to the extreme.

A generally very positive person and able to handle stress at work (as well as in my personal life) rather well, I had to come to terms this past week with and acknowledge the fact that I was at the brink of a break-down. The fight in safe-guarding our patients and our practice against COVID-19 had begun to take its toll...

As in every setting managing a unit is very rewarding but also extremely stressful and challenging at times. Facing the COVID-19 pandemic and managing mainly the chemotherapy section in a private sector outpatient oncology unit, it quickly became clear that we (as a practice) and also myself, would be facing some unique challenges that would stretch us many a time up to breaking point.

Apart from the general duties of managing the nursing staff, authorisation staff, stock and financial management, patient satisfaction, resource management etc... we now suddenly had to set up a COVID-19 task team to at best try and curb the negative impact of this pandemic on our practice. Many an early morning meeting together with most nights putting in hours to keep up with the general and additional workload... we had to protect our patients but also ourselves, our loved ones and our jobs.

It is for this reason (to protect my elderly parents whom I have been sharing a home with for the past year) that I decided to move out of the house into the outside quarters. I would basically only be seeing them for dinner where I would be sitting at the far end of the table. No more hugging or kissing each other goodbye. All went well the first while but nobody was prepared for the length of time this would have to be the modus operandi... the psycho-social impact is huge, and so I know it is for many a co-worker of mine and in some instances even much worse for them. Relationships are falling apart in certain homes, finances are in shambles, loved ones are ill and some have even lost people they loved or had at least known, to COVID-19.

There is a lot to be said for everything that has happened the past three months in our facility, mostly good and an excellent growth opportunity. For myself it has been extremely stressful to make the call on who is allowed into the practice and who not and deciding on who should be sent for a COVID-19 swab when a doctor wasn't available. Many a time I had to ask myself whether I was being paranoid or really taking the staff, practice and the particular persons' well-being into consideration. To stay friendly, approachable and caring when people are being unreasonable and inconsiderate and putting everyone else in the way of possible harm (patients, family members and staff)... this, whilst having your normal work waiting (and having to

re-focus and re-focus and re-focus)... has proven to be very difficult. None of us signed up for this, and are tired of PPE on PPE off, sanitise, temp, sanitise, don't touch your face... sir, wear your mask properly please... Ma'am, your mask needs to cover your mouth and your nose... no you cannot have coffee in this area, because then you have to remove your mask to drink it sir... I apologise for the inconvenience, sanitise... no, your loved one is not allowed to accompany you... PPE off then PPE on... break-outs on your skin... sanitise...

Challenges apart from the obvious, as stated, already have been the extremely long hours due to the general work piling up as a result of COVID-19-related issues on a daily basis. Patients not being truthful about their symptoms or the fact that they have actually tested positive for COVID-19 (whether they are afraid that they will be refused care or that they are ignorant) is an unexpected challenge. Negotiating the stock management, ordering and financial aspects of PPE and at times even the lack of availability remains a mission and will remain so until this has passed. A unique challenge to oncology is the fact that many patients have side-effects related to their particular type of cancer or due to treatment that overlaps with COVID-19 symptoms such as sore throat, flu-like symptoms, pyrexia, coughing, loss of taste and smell which adds the danger of missing a COVID-19-positive patient. Also having over committed staff (or maybe not realising and understanding the seriousness of the matter even after numerous training sessions) coming to work with symptoms and therefore adding a burden to the work-load with dealing with the situation and then... if testing positive, having only skeleton-staff to keep the wheels turning. A certain level of flexibility also has to remain in place and motivating my staff to realise that the only thing certain at this stage is uncertainty in terms of changing protocols as we learn, changing shift hours as we need to and yes, the financial implications on most households.

Never did we have to revisit our pledge that we made as nurses as we have to now...

"I solemnly pledge myself to the service of humanity and will endeavour to practise my profession with conscience and with dignity... the total health of my patients will be my first consideration..."

Difficult times? Yes. Uncertain times? Yes. Stretched to the limit? Yes. Up for the challenge? YES!

To all my fellow nurses out there I would like to say...WELL DONE!!! We are showing the world (yet again) what we are capable of as a collective, but also as individuals. Please remember to practise self-care amidst the challenges you face... and stay safe... physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually.

Regards

Zelna Visagie