Be someone’s angel: A long-term-care nurse

By Donna Smouse Ferguson, RN, BS

To truly connect with your patients, try this specialty.

MY CAREER IN NURSING began in long-term care, and I wouldn’t trade the experience for anything. In this article, I’m going to tell you why you too might want to consider becoming a long-term care nurse.

The demand for this specialty should be strong. The United States has a population of 300 million people, and approximately one in eight are older adults. By the year 2030, the proportion of older adults is predicted to increase to one in five. Caring and compassionate nurses in long-term-care facilities will be responsible for ensuring quality care and quality of life for many of these older adults.

Look at the practical advantages of this field. Long-term-care facilities are located in the community, so you may find work near your home. You may be eligible for many opportunities to advance, with or without specialized training. Your facility may pay for you to advance your training or improve your skills.

If you enjoy technical challenges, consider this: Because of longer life spans, shorter hospital stays, and medical advances, long-term-care facilities are admitting older, sicker residents. Your skill is needed to accurately operate medical equipment, to care for patients using ventilators or central lines or peripherally inserted central catheters, to perform blood draws, and to insert I.V. catheters. Aging affects residents’ skin integrity, requiring you to be skilled in wound care and prevention. A resident’s health can change very quickly, requiring you to promptly and accurately assess him and implement care using your critical-thinking skills.

Now let’s weigh some of the intangible benefits. Nurses in long-term care can enrich the lives of our older residents through caring and compassion. Anne Marie Barnett said, “I found out that if you want to make a difference in someone’s life and form relationships with your patients and their families, long-term-care nursing is the way to go.”

If you’re a nurse in a long-term-care facility, you may be the reason your resident smiles. You may even be the highlight of his day, but for me it’s not a one-way street—I find that building a compassionate relationship with a resident enriches both of our lives. For instance, my older patients’ life stories are filled with first-hand knowledge of history: They were soldiers in World War I and II, they’ve experienced the technology revolution, and they raised families during the Depression. You can read about any subject you like, but you may not feel the emotion unless you listen to someone who was there. Listening enhances our lives as nurses.

Hospitals, with shorter and shorter lengths of stay, offer less opportunity for nurses to get to know their patients with acute illnesses. Our facilities, on the other hand, offer extended care. Caring for a human being on a daily basis offers rewards and challenges like those of being in a family. At times, you are the resident’s family.

Long-term-care nursing encompasses all aspects of the residents’ life needs. You’re there to listen when they need to talk, hug them when they’re blue, and reorient them when they become confused. Sometimes their only comfort comes from being able to recognize a familiar face.

Marion Casey Renz once asked a nurse in a long-term-care unit, “Why do you keep coming back here?” The nurse replied, “I figure that someday I’m going to be like one of these old people, unable to care for myself. I won’t want to burden my kids, so I’ll have to depend on the kindness of others.” You have the power to ensure that the “kindness of others” exists for the future residents of long-term-care facilities.

Seize the opportunity to use your caring and compassion to enrich the lives of older adults. “Long-term care workers are the angels of this world,” according to Dorothy Seman. Are you ready to be someone’s angel?

REFERENCES


RESOURCES

Long-Term Care Nurses Association. http://www.ltcna.org
Web sites last accessed on October 21, 2008.

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