



## From Head Nurse:

# MATURED GRIEF AFTER A PATIENT LOSS

**Kang Fang-Yu, Head Nurse, SICU, Taipei Tzu Chi Hospital**

When I graduated from Tzu Chi Nursing College (now Tzu Chi University of Science and Technology) in 1999, I chose to start my career at Yeezen Hospital at Yangmei. The decision was mainly based on the fact that Yangmei is close to my hometown of Chungli. During my internship days, I constantly reminded myself the motto I learned from school. That is: "Take care of your patients' body and soul with your selfless Great Love (Da Ai)!" This principle of nursing was carried out in my daily chores in the hospital ward. One day, a senior nurse was so puzzled and asked me, "Why do you tend your patients' nails and clean their ears?" I answered, "Their nails are getting too long and they cannot listen clearly without cleansing, I just try to help them live more comfortable. I don't expect to get any reward by doing such things." I just wanted to develop my style of nursing with the knowledge I gained from school.

### **More Praise and Encouragement**

I returned to Taipei Tzu Chi Hospital in February of 2006. I applied the same standard to my junior colleagues. One day, a nursing supervisor reminded me, "You should not be so serious with the juniors, or you will scare them away from their jobs." I discussed the event with my husband that evening and said, "In the past, our seniors

always treated us very strict. And, we always thought that was because we didn't do a perfect job." My husband replied, "Don't expect everybody work in the same way as you do. Sometimes, you think their performance is only 80% of your standard, but your juniors may think they have reached 100%."

The conversation with my husband made me recall my childhood experience. When I was small, my mother was very busy working. I had to stay in my uncle's house and was cared by my grandmother. My uncle was an educator and very strict to the youngsters. However, I was like a hard to tame wild horse. Quite often, I was the leader among my cousins for mischievous activities. So many days, I would play outside till dark and went home unwillingly until the urging voice of my grandmother. Because of these habits, I was often behind in school work. My uncle would punish me for the poor performance at school. But, that did not push me to study hard. To avoid punishment, I improved my school work just enough to satisfy my uncle's standard.

When I started in Tzu Chi Nursing College, I often was confronted with homesickness and depression. When I felt homesick, I would call my grandmother, just to say hi, and just to hear her soft voice. Grand mom's miracle voice time and time again turned off my negative attitude, and encouraged me to go on. Besides grandma,

**Becoming a Head Nurse is the career goal of Kang Fang-Yu (left). She changed her style along her career path from a strict leader to "analytical, encouragement and expectation" management.**





**Kang Fang-Yu discovered that smoothness is the key for professional performance and source of harmony.**

my loneliness away from home was dissolved by many of my Tzu Chi parents (Yi dé father and mother). Even though they are not my relatives, but their advice, their accompanying, their encouragement, and their expectation provided the power for me to become a good nurse.

In 2015, I was transferred from the 8B ward to SICU. On the 27th of June that year, the famous incident of 'Pa-Hsien Dust Explosion' occurred. As the head nurse, the burden of caring for more than ten severely burned patients fell upon my shoulder.

It was a difficult time. But I remember the words of Dharma Master Cheng Yen: "To change others, first change yourself." These words taught me to treat my patients with kindness and communicate with their families with sincerity. Furthermore, I also learned that to be a leader I must encourage and praise my junior nurses often in order to build their confidence. This way, my leadership would be much smoother and my expectation would be easier to fulfill.

### **Calm Analysis - Empathy**

When Junior nurse Yu-Fang was blamed by a patient's family members, she complained to me the incident, "Ay Chang (nickname for the Head Nurse), I did tell him that I will be there soon as I finish the dressing here. But the patient insisted that I ignored him. And the family member kept complaining." The incident clearly indicated that both my junior staff and the patient's family need emotional support.

I told Yu-Fang, "I understand that you have done your best, I saw it all. But the elder patient is in the bed all by himself. A one minute delay on your part would be a whole hour in his mind. When the family member of the patient had the feeling that his care was ignored, can you blame him for their reaction?" As Yu-Fang pondered, I added, "Your performance is excellent all these times. But today, you suddenly forgot that you are a nurse and became emotional." My analysis first calmed Yu-Fang down. This way she was able to carefully figure out what she did wrong during the incident. I then added my words of encouragement, so that she would not give up nursing because of a temporary setback.

### **Caring like a Family Member, The Power of Love**

In 2016, a traffic accident victim, Hsiao Bo, entered our emergency unit with severe injuries. His internal organs were exposed and his life was in danger. With the expert care of our medical team, his life was saved. However, the first thing he said after awakening was, "I want to die!" We first gave Hsiao Bo a series of psychological treatments to calm him down. Then, I asked a family member to bring him his cell phone. We hoped that in doing so the interaction with friends and from viewing videos, we could divert his attention. Hopefully, that would arouse his desire to live.

Yu-Fang treated Hsiao Bo like a family member. When she learned that Hsiao Bo was depressed and lost his will to live, she was affected emotionally. One day, when a nurse was dressing Hsiao Bo, she noticed that he was holding on the cards. The nurse thought that the cards must be sent from his girlfriend. It turned out that it was signed by Yu-Fang, and was hand made by her. I was so moved by this act of Yu-Fang. Because Yu-Fang's father had been hospitalized and she realized what a patient's need lying on a hospital bed.

When Hsiao Bo inquired about his release date, Yu-Fang asked me, "What else can I do for him?" I suggested that she could design a personal calendar for him. This way he could record on the days when someone gave him a special treat; and also record some encouraging words said to him. These would provide him a purpose to survive.

Yu-Fang made a diary style calendar with a big red heart on the front cover plus the words 'We Love You'. When it was delivered to Hsiao Bo, he was in a coma because of a stroke due to bacterial infections.

When Hsiao Bo awoke from the coma for the first time, the whole nursing staff was very excited; his family was also very joyful. Yet because of his abdominal and legs wounds were too huge, and without the protection of skin, bacterial infections gradually invaded his entire body. He fell into coma again. He never woke up again! The turn of event was very hard to accept by the family. Hsiao Bo's mother is a Tzu Chi Commissioner. It was heartbreaking to see her son passing. Fellow Tzu Chi volunteers comforted her and told her, "Let go of him, let him go free and easy." With tears, the mother finally signed the agreement to stop all life-supporting devices. This way, Hsiao Bo would leave and reincarnate, and come back as a lovely little living bodhisattva.

At the last moment, the entire nursing staff was doing our best for his terminal care. When we sincerely blessed Hsiao Bo and deeply gave him a final bow, Yu-Fang rushed into the ICU ward crying and in tears. I fully realized the feeling of a fresh nurse confronting a sudden death. At the moment, I offered my words of wisdom to her, "Life is impermanent. He leaves at a young age. Hopefully, he will return fast. You did what you could for him, both physically and mentally. It's not because of your poor performance that caused his death. You should have no regret. He should appreciate your care and your support. As medical personnel, your duty is to comfort the family of the diseased. We should learn from what happened so we will do a better job next time when facing similar situation, so that patients will be better served."

### **Pleasure seeing progress, teaching with motherly love**

Being a mother of two, one in the third grade and the other in the fourth, sometimes I am too busy and have no time to take care of my own. I would recall the days when my mom was too busy to take care of me. I would ask myself, "Do I have to do what my mother did to me? Do I have to send my kids to their uncle's home?" Then, the words of Dharma Master Cheng Yen came to my mind. She said, "Take good care of your family before you do anything else. This way, your job is more acceptable to your family." So, I would spend as much time as I could with my children. Besides, I would give the kind of love to my junior nurses and watch them mature.

The job pressure is tremendous working in the Tzu Chi Hospital because of the extremely high demand and expectation from the general public. The younger nurses all come from different families and having different views of career growth. Also, it is very



**Kang Fang-Yu (left) witnessed the hard work of Chang Yu-Fang opening the mind of patient Hsiao Bo. Kang wish Yu-Fang can transfer her grief into a source of energy as Hsiao Bo departed.**

difficult to satisfy all the patients and their families. Young nurses are often frustrated when they think that they have done their best, but the other sides are still not satisfied. The only words I could offer would be to try to think the way the patients and their families do, and do not forsake the principles of nursing.

Soon, I will complete 20 years of nursing. Whenever I am down, I always recite the words from Master Cheng Yen's Aphorisms, "Medicine Buddha Sutra", and "The Sutra of Infinite Meaning". The experience Yu-Fang gained from Hsiao Bo let me witness her professional growth. I see her maturity in interacting with patients and their families. I am so proud to see her change.

As for my own growth, I keep reminding myself to spend more time with my children and treat my junior nurses with motherly love. I would patiently transfer my nursing experience to them so they can perfect their nursing careers.