

A Diploma for Overcoming Sputum Suctioning

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Working for over 25 years, I always remember my severe nasal congestion caused by a bad cold 20 years ago. To get my airway open as soon as possible, the clinic physician used a small cotton swab moistened with medicine and inserted directly into the nasal cavity. With physical endurance and struggle, the thought that flashed through my mind was, “This is how it feels to draw sputum out or put a nasogastric tube in!” Although it only took a few seconds to poke the nose, my heart was screaming. When the treatment was over, with a sigh of relief, I quietly reminded myself to remember this feeling deeply.

Deal with Feelings First, Then the Matter

Last year, at the Empathy Workshop organized by the Taiwan Academy of Hospice Palliative Medicine, I learned that the use of empathy goes beyond the past affinity. They taught us when dealing with situations, we have to “Deal with Feelings First, Then the Matter”. It’s really a treasure. At the same time, it reminded me of a case I took care of recently which provides a good example.

74 year-old Uncle Smart stayed in this unit due to a stroke and needed rehabilitation treatment. Uncle Smart is just admitted to the hospital and unhappy. He cries whenever he gets a call from a friend or misses home. Especially when it comes to drawing sputum, both tearful and resisting. The wife who care for him seems broken and distressed. Other times, he looks depressed, and stay motionless, with no expression, let alone rehabilitative. This couple; wife is impatient, husband is slow with strong feelings. I feel



that one thing they have in common is that they love to cry.

Uncle Smart has a smoking addiction for decades. He always needs a nasogastric tube when hospitalized. Even though he is already trained to eat, but obviously there's cough with sputum and unable to clear itself. So after a team discussion, we decided to communicate with his wife first. During the hospitalization, it is forbidden to feed him to avoid choking. Then there is the sputum treatment by the Health Education and also the disposal of sputum by the nurse. Past experience of sputum suctioning was terrifying to the patient who could only accept it helplessly. Although the wife accepted it, she was very reluctant and worried her husband would be resentful to the point where he wouldn't talk and always crying.



Tears Become Smaller, Brave to Suctioning

As always, I used my way to talk to Uncle Smart for the suctioning. After I got ready, I leaned next to his ear and told him, “Uncle, I’m going to draw sputum now. Don’t be scared. I will do it gently”. Then I saw him shedding tears immediately. After a few seconds of crying, I stroked his cheek and said, “Ok, ok. Sorry!” The wife hadn’t recomposed herself so I beckoned her to give me a tissue to wipe away tears for Uncle Smart. At the same time I said, “Uncle, sorry and appreciated.”

The next few days, Uncle Smart already improved from being silent to slowly responding, then saying thank you to me. He even started to have a

smile on his face by the second week of treatment. He still sheds tears when he gets suctioning, but the wife is relieved to see him smile.

The First Nurse to be Thanked for Suctioning

Just when Uncle Smart was getting better, he chose to be transferred to another hospital due to COVID-19 Pandemic Policy, but he came back within two weeks at his own expense. As soon as we met, the wife hugged me and first thing she said was, "It's so nice to see you again. I feel so peaceful." It turned out Smart Uncle was shedding tears every day at the other hospital. He was complaining and shouting, wanting to be discharged. So they decided to come back here instead. The next few days, Uncle Smart soon smiled again. The amount of sputum gradually improved, and frequency gradually reduced. Also, his tears also shrunk to the point where only a single drop condensed in the corner of his right eye during suctioning. Surprisingly, Uncle Smart took the initiative to tell me with a smile, "Thank you." Next, after each suctioning, the wife always emphasize, "Nurse, you are the first person to do suctioning and he took the initiative to say thank you."

I Want to Stay in Hospital, It's Warmer than Home

Finally, with team effort, Uncle Smart's mood is more cheerful, rehabilitation has improved significantly, nasogastric tube has been removed, and now he walks without aids. He used to be an introvert and quiet, but now he's humorous and talkative. The wife was very surprised and delighted by his recovery and personality change. Two weeks before the planned discharge, Smart Uncle said astonishingly, "Can I not be discharged? Every day there are people who are warm-hearted, a good environment, everyone I meet is kind and it's warmer than home." I answered him with a smile, "What! Are you not afraid of suctioning anymore?" He waved his hand shyly to stop mentioning it.

On the day of discharge, we made him a Sputum Suction Diploma and held a graduation ceremony for Uncle Smart with the blessings of many patients and colleagues. Uncle Smart, I will always remember your gratitude and Thank You. I will continue good deeds diligently and treat every future, suffering patient with kindness.