



## TIME OUT

Stories from Chicken Soup for the Nurse's Soul

# The depth of this career

By LeAnn Thieman, LPN

YOUNG NURSES have a lot to learn from us older ones—and vice versa. We need to mentor each other and build each other up, not bring each other down. Let's stop the complaining and negative talk at work—the "stinkin' thinkin'." We have so much to share with each other—the stuff they never taught us in nursing school. This nurse's story reminds us that by helping each other, we help our patients too.

I was a young nurse with nothing in common with the grannies and grandpas on the orthopedic surgical floor. Nothing rattled me much—until I met the elderly woman with gangrene. Both of her calves were decaying. When I'd helped other nurses change the dressings, I tried to look out the window so I wouldn't have to see the decaying flesh. I'd felt lucky not to have been assigned to this patient. But today was my turn.

"Emma Palmer had her dressings done at 6," the charge nurse told me. "She's going to surgery at 10 for a bilateral above-the-knee amputation."

Whew, I thought, *I don't have to mess with those legs.*

I held my breath against the odor as I entered her room.

"How are you doing, Mrs. Palmer?"

"Hmm?" The old woman glanced at me and looked away. She was thin, her skin browned by the sun and robbed of moisture. I helped her sit forward and placed the stethoscope against her back. "Take a deep breath."

I decided not to peel back the covers to check her legs. No need. She'd have fresh, healthy stumps this afternoon.

"Surgery's at 10 o'clock," I said. "You're going to feel a lot better by tomorrow."

"Why do you say that?" The woman turned her eyes on me. "My legs don't hurt."

"You'll be healthier."

"Hmm."

"It's all for the best," I continued. "There's really no other choice. And they'll teach you how to walk again." I gave Emma's hand a quick squeeze.

Tears welled up in her eyes. *I can't handle this*, I thought. "I'll be back in a little while," I blurted, and I left to pass meds.

Dolores was working that day. She was an older nurse, competent in every way, though she wore false eyelashes and a big, poofy hairdo with ringlets. I always felt apprehensive working alongside her because I knew Dolores was a much better nurse than I was. When Dolores gave me suggestions, she was always right—and I hated to be wrong. It disturbed me to be corrected by someone who

looked so ridiculous.

It was 9 o'clock when Dolores caught me in the hall and asked how my morning was going.

"Good," I replied. "I've got everything under control."

"How about that surgery?" she asked softly. "Emma Palmer?"

"It's all ready."

"I took care of Emma yesterday," said Dolores. "Such a shame, what's happening to her."

As we glanced into Mrs. Palmer's room, we saw her dangling at the foot of her bed, watching the hallway for help.

"Oh, she's crying!" Dolores raced to her bedside. She put an arm around Mrs. Palmer's neck, the other arm under her bandaged legs, and scooped her gently into bed.

I couldn't imagine touching those legs with bare arms.

"Didn't your family come to see you yet?" Dolores asked.

"N-no. I don't have any family."

"Oh, honey," Dolores sat down on the mattress and hugged her close.

Emma hung her head on Dolores' shoulder and sobbed. I stepped back and swallowed.

"Oh, Emma." Dolores began to rock her soothingly. "It's all right. No, it's really not all right, is it?"

Emma let loose a bigger flood of tears. Her mouth opened wide but speechless.

"Yeah, it's the pits, it sure is," said Dolores, her strong arms wrapped around those frail shoulders.

Emma said, "How will I ever manage?"

That's when I began to understand the depth of this career and how shallow I'd chosen to make it. Would I ever be able to give as much from the heart as Dolores did, so easily, so naturally?

I walked to the bed, sat on the other side of Emma and placed my hand on her leg. "I know how, Emma. I'll help you."

—Diane Stallings, RN ♦

Diane Stallings has been a hospital nurse for 30 years and currently works as a CV-ICU nurse in Arizona. LeAnn Thieman, a certified speaking professional, is a motivational speaker and the coauthor of *Chicken Soup for the Nurse's Soul* and *Chicken Soup for the Nurse's Soul, Second Dose*. To learn more about her books or presentations, visit <http://www.NurseRecruitmentandRetention.com> or call 1-877-THIEMAN.