



Risk Manager's Notebook

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EMPATHY – WHAT IT MEANS TO RISK MANAGEMENT

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Risk management is not just about loss control and avoiding litigation. Sure, as nurses, attending physicians, administrators, and aides, we are dedicated to creating safe environments to prevent complaints and claims. But there's another dimension to risk management. It's called "empathy," and it works.

As a critical care nurse for 25 years, perhaps the most valuable thing I've learned, apart from nursing skills, is the importance of trying to see any situation through the eyes of the patient. I found long ago that putting myself in the patient's position enhances my ability to communicate on a personal, not just a clinical level. This creates mutual understanding and trust that improves care and relieves anxiety.

You can't fake empathy. You have to feel it inside. But, you can learn to be mindful of the emotional as well as the physical needs of those you serve. If you make empathy a priority, it will not only build trust on the part of your residents or patients, it will give meaning to your day and ultimately reduce risk in your workplace.

Empathy Builds Trust

A psychiatrist said that a necessary condition of a functional, caring relationship is appreciation of the other person's feelings. There's a fine line between "sympathy" and "empathy." We all sympathize with the plight of our residents and patients. Sympathy means feeling sorry for the other person, but empathy builds trust because the resident knows you care.

We became nurses because we wanted to help other people – because we cared. We weren't looking for money. We sought a profession in which our medical skills along with our devotion would ease the suffering and improve the lives of those in our care. However, it's sometimes hard not to get cynical or burned out. The long hours, the often sad outcomes, and the occasionally disagreeable resident or patient can get to you. Maybe it's a defense mechanism when surrounded by sickness, dementia, or the irascible patient – but we must guard against the tendency to put ourselves first and the resident or patient second.

As a risk manager, part of my job is visiting nursing homes and other long-term care facilities around the country. I ran into a situation just a few weeks ago that made me heartsick and angry. While standing at the nurses' station reviewing charts, a distraught patient in a wheelchair came up to the duty nurse. "I need to go to the bathroom," he implored – obviously in distress. "I'm on break," the nurse responded and walked away. An aide came by. The old gentleman beseeched her, "I need the bathroom – please!" The aide replied casually, "Let me get Mr. Smith," and walked away. Finally, someone came to help. By this time, the poor old man was on the verge of tears.

Don't forget that you set an example for the staff. The way you respond to residents will influence the behavior of all who work in your facility and interact with residents. You are a role model. If you put your personal convenience first and caring second, your attitude will be reflected quickly in the attitudes of those around you from therapists to nurses' aides and orderlies.

Take a Step Back

Empathy is a necessary condition of a functioning, caring relationship. It's especially important in a nursing home or



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assisted living environment where residents are fragile and anxious. As a nurse, empathy is in your genes, but the pressures of work can make you forget the importance of being ever mindful, not only of the needs of those in your care, but of their feelings. Empathy not only helps the patient. If you find yourself becoming cynical, take a step back and remember why you became a nurse. Try to be cheerful and positive in your relations with residents even when you're having a difficult day. You'll soon discover that working at empathy not only helps the residents, it makes you feel better.

Involve the Family

Putting yourself in the resident's shoes applies equally to their families. You can begin to build a trusting relationship with the family on the day of admission. This is a critical time to be empathetic. It will stand you and your facility in good stead, when you have to call the son or daughter and say, "Mom fell, we're taking good care of her." They'll understand because they know you're there for their loved one.



"Empathy builds trust because the resident knows you care."

Why? Because at the time of admission, the Administrator, the physician, and the Director of Nursing involved the family in the plan of care. You took the patient's history. You recorded the family's concerns. You educated them on the diagnosis. You designed a treatment program that took into account not just the clinical information but reflected the resident's subjective needs. You informed them of what could happen. You created an atmosphere of trust because you understood the family's apprehension and anxiety about putting mom or dad in a nursing home. You did more than ask routine questions and fill out forms.

This is most important because it demonstrates that the welfare of the residents is the top priority in your facility. If this attitude is communicated to the family at the beginning, and if it's reflected in the attitude of all your employees, residents will be happier. They'll feel better. The natural fear and anxiety that goes with entering a long-term care facility will be relieved. And, from a practical point of view, the likelihood of claims and lawsuits will be dramatically reduced.

Administrator Sets the Tone

If the leader has an empathetic, outgoing attitude, it spreads to the staff. The Administrator sets the tone of the facility. When I visit a nursing home, I ask the Administrator to take me on a tour. On the tour I see the relationship he or she has with residents and staff. If the Administrator calls the patients by name, stops to give a pat on the back or touch a hand asking – "How're you doing today? How's your day going?" – I immediately sense the warmth and caring that pervades the home. Same for the staff. They take their cue from the leader. In this home, the Administrator is a mentor, not just

a manager. He or she creates a climate in which nurses, aides, and staff know they can take any problem to their supervisor and receive willing counsel and support. This open, caring attitude is picked up by residents. And, incidentally, you'll find it reflected in the high level of satisfaction residents report as well as the low level of claims and litigation these homes experience.

You could say that empathy should just be a matter of common sense and compassion. However, its importance is being recognized in medical and nursing education today. Empathy, under whatever name it's called, is becoming a teaching topic, a part of the curriculum in medical and nursing schools. Why? Simply because experience shows that establishing empathetic relationships has a therapeutic effect. It improves patients' coping skills.

When your patients know they reside in a caring environment, they truly will feel better. So will you!

