

Bleeding Ink

By Cashel “Cassie” Ahrens (BSN 2016)

I look down at my paper that was once crisp and white, fresh from the printer, and now it is so covered with writing that I struggle to find space to write down the vital signs. The folded edges are now dull as the paper fibers are softened from the alcohol and dampness from my recently washed hands.

My prep work holds everything. If I lose these pages, I am lost. If I lose them, the patient is lost. They hold the name, the medical history, the reason for a hospital stay, the recent assessment, and the lab values. They hold what I think the nurse should be doing, and they hold what the doctors want me to do. When I lose these pages, I drop everything I am doing to recover them, and when I find them, I brush them off, and I scold both them and myself for the temporary separation. I even have to glance at the pages before coming into the room to make sure I am not mistaking one patient’s name with another.

I get the vital signs and write them down. The blood pressure seems high though, and things just don’t seem right. A question directed towards me: “What was this value? Did the patient get this medication today? What did this look like yesterday?”

Me: “Oh... Uhm... I don’t know... Hold on.” Terror pours over me. My own pulse goes up and my whole body constricts. I glance over my paper just begging and willing the information I need to magically highlight itself so I can find the needed data. I was literally just in the room and looking at the machine, how can I forget this?

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But wait...

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My paper doesn’t tell me what *you*, the patient, think is important. My paper is not you; it is not even a good summary of you. I spent the night before, hours of my time, looking and preparing to view you as the information on my sheet. But you are not a paper. You are a person, with soft hands that squeeze mine because I took the time to squat beside your bed this morning and say, “Hi, my name is Cassie, and I’ll be the nursing student taking care of you today. What will make today a good day?”

I look into your eyes and I don’t see ink, letters, and words. Instead I see meaning, I see the big picture of my paper, and oh so much more. The letters may spell out a town that you come from, but they don’t tell me about the house you grew up in, or the baby goats on the farm that make you smile event still to this day. Neither do those meticulously typed notes tell me the pain that is in your eyes, or the glow on your face when you talk about your grandchildren. The pages warn me that you can be aggressive, but your hunched over body is what explains to me that you are just tired and want to feel like people are seeing your being, not the ink on the page.

When I leave from my clinical day I turn in my pages for a grade. The reality though, is that you being yourself and sharing your life with me has taught me more than my entire 4 years in nursing school. You are the true teacher, and I should be looking at you and not the ink on the page.

Traditionally, nursing students burn the pages of prep in a final celebration to be rid of the pages, the time spent, and the work put in. The letters, the words, the ink all go up in flame, but I still see your eyes and feel your hand on mine long after the pages are gone. Your being, not the words, is the reason I went into Nursing and the reason why I stay.