

Medical Patients And the Responsibilities of the Nurse

By Mrs. Elizabeth Jacob*

THE MORE a nurse works with medical patients the more she realises her challenges and responsibilities. Whether a nurse chooses her area of work or she is assigned to work or she is prepared to work, she can have different implications and outcomes in medical nursing. Whichever way she has come into contact with medical patients, she needs to realise that her responsibilities in the patient care are tremendous.

What are her responsibilities? In her daily experience, she meets with patients suffering from different diseases, in different stages of illness presenting different problems and needs. She meets with men and women of different age groups, rich and poor, educated and uneducated who come from different cultures and religious backgrounds. She comes across patients who come in for treatment of a confirmed disease or patients undergoing a number of investigations day after day and wait to know the cause of their illness. At the same time she meets with other patients who have tried all available treatments in different hospitals and have come to know whether anything more can be done to relieve their illness. There are patients who come in acute, sub-acute, chronic and convalescing phase of their illness. There is yet another group who are critically ill and are dying and medical science has very little to offer them to regain their health.

Every patient in each bed is a different individual who has different medical and nursing needs. Any illness whether minor or major affects the patient and his family in

different ways. Such a variety of patients with variety of problems would make greater demands on the part of the nurse to be more alert and sensitive to the human needs, more observant and competent in identifying and meeting their total needs.

A nurse working with medical patients can never feel bored because there is so much to learn, so much to think about and so much to do. With the advances in medical science, understanding of the disease process has improved considerably. The finer and sensitive investigations and tests now available have made it possible to confirm diagnosis faster. The ever increasing number of excellent and potent drugs has reduced the suffering and increased the longevity of patients. The nurse in such an area where there is so rapid advancement in the understanding of the underlying principles of medical, social and biological sciences is essential in the preparation of a medical nurse.

Progressive self-education is an important requirement of a nurse. Working with medical patients she needs to sharpen all her senses to deepen and widen her understanding of the patient's disease process, the meaning of illness to him and his family, the different measures to help him recover fast and to be back in his social setting as a well-adjusted individual. The nurse gets a variety of learning opportunities at the patient's bedside. Only if she uses them to the fullest extent she could demonstrate newer and greater skills in patient care.

Any amount of knowledge and understanding of the patient's condition is not going to help the patient unless he receives intelligent

and skilful nursing care. Every patient's nursing care needs to be planned well just as the medical care is planned. Lack of adequate planning makes the nursing care routine and impersonal. It would be ideal to have a bedside card or some specific place in the chart to write the nursing care plan. This would be a guide for other nurses to follow. An experienced graduate nurse could make the plan in the beginning until the students are able to make the plan themselves. The plan should be changed according to the changing needs of the patient. Major aspects of care specific to the particular patient only need to be included in the plan. We have tried it in our medical wards for patients who are critically ill and those who need special nursing care. Such a plan would emphasise nursing care more than doctors orders. We found it useful to individualize nursing care to some extent.

I would like to point out few other responsibilities that are quite specific to the care of medical patients. Sometimes I have wondered whether nurses are aware of the contributions they make toward various investigations. Many tests are so vital and the treatments will depend upon their findings. Most of them are so expensive that the average patient finds it difficult to pay for. The nurse assisting with these investigations should understand the significance of each investigation done for that particular patient. She needs to know how effectively it can be done or helped with so that it will provide maximum benefit and at the same time cost less to the patient and to the hospital.

In the majority of medical problems diet has a therapeutic value. The nurse needs a thorough knowledge of the different types of diets prescribed for each patient. She has a great responsibility to see that the patients get the therapeutic diet and the patient enjoys it. Often she is asked for guidance in diet planning of the patient and the family.

A nurse caring for medical patients requires special personality traits to adapt herself in the care
(Contd. on page 21)

* Associate Professor—Departmental Sister, College of Nursing Vellore.