

Jigsaw puzzle

By Darla Bodell, RN

The room was a whirlwind, abuzz with heightened activity as I walked in. It is deemed the trauma room, the place where the sickest of the sick come into emergency to get state-of-the-art care. People were dashing about in some sort of organized chaos. There were at least eight of them—eight medical professionals all with their specific duty, doing their particular piece to make this trauma of a puzzle take some sort of shape. All the persons involved with a trauma work together in an orchestrated stressful scenario, linking their puzzle piece with the next person and then with the next person, hopefully to gain a positive outcome, matching the picture on the puzzle box. But when I walked in amongst the activity that was just getting started and saw a nurse performing CPR, pounding on a patient's chest, I could foresee the outcome, and it wasn't a good one. Sometimes the patient makes it, but most times they don't.

The buzzing continued. IVs were started here and there, vital signs taken, defibrillation initiated, medications were given to jumpstart the heart again, but to no avail, and the nurse resumed CPR. I saw the beads of sweat drip down his face, as he performed the procedure. Even for a man, CPR is a very labour-intensive activity and so I offered to take over for him. We switched positions and I initiated CPR, essentially where my compressions acted like the patient's heartbeat, pulsing blood through the vessels to maintain adequate oxygen perfusion to the vital organs, namely the brain. Within seconds I began to silently pray in my head that a blanket of peace would wrap around the family members.

I continued to compress the patient's chest and the family members were let in to see their loved one. A fully-grown daughter and son, likely with children of their own, came to hold their parent's hand. They teared up slightly at the ghastly sight laid out before them, but composed themselves for the sake of both their parent and for each other. "Don't give up," they pleaded. "Stay with us. Come on, stay with us." As I continued to repetitiously perform CPR, I resumed my silent prayers that no one else in the room knew I was doing.


The nurse and I spent the next 30 minutes switching on and off doing CPR. Medications continued to be given and defibrillation performed every few minutes—I sensed the room tension decreasing. All of which meant one thing: we've done all we can do. I looked at the doctor and we made eye contact. He nodded his head to me and I nodded back in understanding. I knew it was just a matter of time and I hoped that their hearts will realize it is time to say good-bye. Just then I heard the daughter whisper to her brother, "I think it's done. I don't think this is working anymore." My heart ached for them. These two children would be losing their parent tonight.

I continued CPR and watched, almost in slow motion, as the doctor approached the man and woman. In a soft voice he ex-

plained all the things we had done in the trauma room and ended the explanation with, "I'm so sorry. We've done everything humanly possible to help and there is nothing more we can do." The sister and brother simultaneously agreed and, with that, the doctor asked everyone to stop treatment.

The room became silent, the activity abruptly halted and you could hear the burst of heart wrenching weeping throughout the corridors of the emergency department. The daughter and son turned and held one another as though they would never let each other go. Seconds later the patient's spouse arrived along with numerous other family members. Hearing a spouse's guttural cry, as they realize their beloved has passed away is something you never forget as a nurse. It raises hairs on your arms and pierces through all sounds in a busy emergency room. It cuts at the core of who you are and you see the immediate result of loss. Someone has lost a spouse, a parent, a sibling, a friend and now they must begin a healing journey of picking up the pieces.

We, as nurses, help form the jigsaw puzzle with our expertise, but never know the outcome until it happens. Sometimes the puzzle pieces link together smoothly, in perfect accord creating a beautiful picture of healing, health and vitality. Other times, such as these, the puzzle pieces join together and the outcome may not have matched with the picture on the box. The final pieces were placed together etching a scene in my head I'll never forget of a patient passing into the spirit realm surrounded by their dearest loved ones standing at the bedside. It's never the final puzzle result we want, especially since we did everything we could as medical professionals. We always strive for the best outcome. In this situation, at least I know I was a small piece of that jigsaw puzzle and I did my part from a scientific, and medical standpoint, but I also made a difference by supporting the family as much as possible.

The family may never know what we did in that trauma room. They may never understand the medical procedures we performed or the physiologic process of the cells deteriorating. No matter what, we do whatever we must in order to help our patients and that often goes unnoticed. But that's okay with me. I know I did my part and I choose to trust that the final jigsaw puzzle picture turned out the way it was supposed to, regardless of whether I understand it or not. 

About the author



Darla has been an emergency nurse working in Abbotsford, B.C., since 2008, and finds joy in balancing work with home life as a wife of 10 years and mom to two beautiful children, Chase and Raya. Darla began to hone her passion for writing as she chronicled her years as a student nurse developing into an emergency staff nurse through her blog www.runningwildly.blogspot.com