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What it Means to be an ER Nurse

Tracy had always wanted to be a nurse. After a divorce in her thirties she decided that it was time for her to pursue that dream and become a healer. Tracy's whole life she always felt the need to help people and to make their lives easier. Becoming a nurse was something that she had always dreamed of doing, and when the opportunity arose for her to go back to college to finish what she started after high school, Tracy jumped at the chance. Many people choose to become a nurse for different reasons; Some do it because they think that they can make more money only working a few days a week while others do it to help people and comfort them in times of need. People in the nursing profession must have patience, kindness, and the ability to look past the differences in people and treat everyone with respect.

Tracy earned a degree in nursing from Our Lady of Lourdes School of nursing participating in a two-year program with a lot of hands on clinical time. She graduated from nursing school in 2012 and got her very first job in October 2014. She now works in a small but very busy ER. She gets paid by the hour receives a paycheck every two weeks. She also does some teaching in the ER, mostly teaching patients the way to care for themselves when they leave and are on their own at home. As an ER nurse, she has access to quite a few pieces of technology such as, bladder scanners that can tell her how much urine is in your bladder and robots that can communicate with doctors from other hospitals when the ER has a stroke patient.

The decision to become a nurse has changed Tracy's life in so many ways. Tracy considers herself very fortunate to start in what she considers her 'dream job'. She has always thought the excitement of the ER was the perfect place for her. She has seen and done things that she never in a million years thought she would. Tracy explains, "I have saved lives and I have been there at the end of lives. I have taught my kids that sometimes life can knock you down and that you have the ability to get back up and be on your own two feet. I value life more now than I did before, seeing how quickly life can be taken from you." She goes on to explain that she has become a more worrisome person, and finds herself watching her children more closely than she ever did prior to becoming a nurse. Tracy does this because now she knows and sees on a regular basis what could happen to them. Tracy then speaks about how she now has a far better understanding of the mentally ill and has learned how to handle herself in some very scary situations she has encountered while working in the ER.

Tracy states, "I feel like the nurse today is many different things in this day and age. We are care givers, of course. I am a teacher, a confidant, a therapist, a hand holder, a grief counselor, and sometimes even a waitress and housekeeper. My job is to maintain comfort for my patient, and that doesn't always mean pain medication and ice packs."

The range of illnesses she sees in the ER are vast. Tracy encounters patients with minor cuts and scrapes who may simply come to the ER because they don't have the insurance for a Primary Care Provider (PCP). She also can see patients with strokes, heart attack, contagious diseases, mental health issues, broken bones, drug and alcohol addictions, diabetes, abdominal issues and so many more. In the ER she never knows what will walk through the front door. As a nurse, she is the first person that a patient meets with when they arrive to the ER. As such, Tracy's role in the healing process is indispensable.

Some of the major causes of the diseases that she sees on a day to day basis are a problem with the way our society cares for their bodies. Tracy believes that the body works in a couple ways. She says, "There are the anatomical parts of our bodies that work in harmony to keep our blood pumping, lungs expanding, and our extremities moving the way our brain is telling them to. Then, there is a mental aspect to our bodies. When we are mentally happy and content our bodies respond by working properly, when we are stressed or going through tough times the body can shut down. I see a lot of patients that have physical ailments that are being caused by stress. For example, I have seen a lot of patients that think they are having heart attacks, but they simply having anxiety attacks caused by underlying stress." Some of the patients that Tracy meets with are non-compliant with medications and don't maintain a healthy diet or lifestyle. Many of the cases that Tracy helps treat could be prevented if the patient had just followed the advice and recommendations of their PCP. Another problem Tracy brings up is a lack of access to PCP's and proper insurance. Most patients she sees wait until a health problem becomes so extreme they are required to go to the ER. The techniques used in the ER are mostly things that have been taught by other health care providers. They have a nurse educator in the ER that keeps the nurses up to date on the best practices to follow in the ER, and they are changing and improving every day. The staff are given better ways to do things that have been proven to be safer and more effective. They also receive better, more up to date equipment to help in everyday practice. An example in Tracy's ER they were recently given new IV equipment that is safer for the nurses because they have safety caps that prevent them from needle sticks. The equipment is better for the patient because the insertion is far quicker and less painful.

Healing in the ER may come in different ways. Sometimes nurses help with healing simply by taking the time to listen to a patient with chronic issues, who just can't get the help they need somewhere else. Healing can also mean making sure that a

patient with pressure ulcers is turned every 2 hours to prevent more damage. The expected outcome in the ER is to save lives when possible and when appropriate. There are times that because of a patient's wishes or all resources have been exhausted, that a life cannot be saved. Tracy has helped with healing when she gives a patient pain medication, an ice pack, or a warm blanket and the patient is able to relax temporarily. Most people who come in the ER are scared and don't understand what is happening to them. To Tracy, healing can mean holding the hand of an elderly man whose wife is dying.

Tracy measures success in her career by the number of patients that she touches on a personal level. When patients thank her for being kind and caring, or leave feeling better, with a smile knowing that they are getting the treatment and follow up they need; When the families of her patients let her know how much it means to them that she was there for their family member in this time of need. These are the rewarding days and moments.

One of the patients that stands out in her mind was a man that came in to the ER thinking that he had had a heart attack. He was terrified and his family hadn't arrived yet. He had pain in his chest radiating down his arm and he had extremely high blood pressure. Tracy spoke to him and explained all the processes she would be doing and reassured him that she would take good care of him. The EKG revealed that he had not had a heart attack and that possibly the high blood pressure was causing him to have some of his symptoms. She then medicated him to lower the pressure and observed him for several hours in the ER. When his wife arrived frantic, Tracy was able to reassure her that he was in good hands and that he was being monitored very closely. Tracy's entire shift was spent watching and assessing his vital signs and helping his family to understand what was being done to ensure his safety. Two days later, when Tracy arrived at work she was called to the reception desk. A man was standing there holding a large bunch of flowers. He asked if she was "Nurse Tracy"? The card with the flowers read, "Thank you for caring for me in the ER a few days ago. Your warm and caring personality made my wife and I feel comfortable and eased our worries. I'm feeling much better and the nurse navigator that you got us in touch with has gotten me an appt. with cardiology. Good luck with everything you do and continue to be the wonderful nurse you are". This is what she considers success. The feeling Tracy gained from that small gesture of appreciation was indescribable. Tracy ended the interview stating, "That is why I became a nurse. To help people and make a small difference in their lives."

Tracy's practice of healing definitely embodies her spirit of kindness and caring. She combines her technical knowledge with such a strong sense of empathy that her patients feel with every single interaction. Even in situations that are less than ideal she is able to hold true to her philosophies and stay strong in knowing that she truly is helping people. By holding the hands of people who are too far gone to save, or helping

desperate people realize that they do have options to be able to live a longer life, she is a true healer and an example to all in her field.