

student scope

Death and Dying Part I — The Experience M. Diane Newham, B.S., R.T.(R)

My Father Had Alzheimer's Disease . . . And I Watched Him

His brain was deteriorating,
I knew him as my father,
I was young

. . . and I watched him.

He forgot things more and more.

I held his hand and
tried to guide him

. . . and I watched him.

He was changing slowly.

I was scared,
something was wrong

. . . and I watched him.

He was supposed to be
the head of the family.

He couldn't communicate any more

. . . and I watched him.

He didn't know what was happening
and neither did we,

but we had to be strong

. . . and I watched him.

His condition worsened,

he could no longer live at home,

he had to be put in a hospital

. . . and I watched him.

It took long for him to die.

Many times I would be alone

so that no one would see me cry

. . . and I watched him.

As I was growing older

he was becoming more childlike.

At some time we were the same age

. . . and I watched him.

He got to a point where

he didn't recognize us any more.

Yet we still made our usual visit

. . . and I watched him.

I watched him slowly die,

yet I was expected to be strong and not cry.

It took so many years

and I had so many fears,

that I could not help the tears

. . . and I watched him.

I watched him and his condition tear our family apart.

He tugged endlessly at my heart.

He made my mother scream.

My older sister was torn at every seam,

my younger sister hoped it was just a bad

dream

. . . and I watched him.

He had Alzheimer's disease they say

and it affected our family in every way.

At his young age he was mentally gone.

Yet the painful memories linger on

. . . and I watched him.

Diane Newham

My experience with death and dying did not begin as a health care worker. My father had Alzheimer's disease and it began to manifest in 1962; he was 46 years old and I was 4 years old. At that time, there was not an awareness of Alzheimer's as there is today. My father slowly got worse; he had to be institutionalized when I was 15 and finally died at age 62 when I was 20 years old. It was a traumatic and tragic situation. Yet because of it, I can empathize and have compassion for those who are confused, ill, or dying.

Student Scope is edited by Diane Newham, R.T.(R), Program Director-Radiography, Rapid City Regional Hospital, 353 Fairmont Blvd., Rapid City, South Dakota 57701. Please address all questions, suggestions, or contributions to her.

Death and dying can sometimes be instantaneous or a long and arduous process such as Alzheimer's. In the health care setting we have the chance of experiencing the entire spectrum of the death and dying process, from the severe trauma and suicide victims to those with cancer, or in this day and age, the AIDS victims. In order to function efficiently and effectively in the health care setting, we must be aware of and sensitive to the process of death and dying, as opposed to being cold, heartless, and callous to those that we may interact with.

Students who are just beginning their career in health care need to have an awareness of death and dying. I have found that once an individual has an understanding of death and dying, he or she seems to have a greater appreciation for life and living.

One of the projects that I have developed for my students is a hospice experience. In our community, the hospice program is in conjunction with the home health care program. I contacted the coordinator of the hospice program and explained to her what I would like for my students. We have worked together to coordinate times for students to observe and occasionally assist the hospice nurses when they travel to the patient's home. Prior to traveling to the patient's house, the student spends time with the hospice nurse discussing the patient and the hospice program.

The description and objectives that I use for the project are as follows:

In radiology we usually deal with patients briefly. Often we do not have the chance to get to know them. As an educator I feel that students in health care should have an understanding of death and dying. In order to facilitate an understanding of death and dying, the first-year student will spend some time and become familiar with the hospice program.

The student will complete a report based on the following objectives:

- I. Prior to the hospice experience
 - A. Write a summary of your feeling concerning death and dying.
 - B. In a brief paragraph, discuss how you feel about doing this project.
 - C. Write a brief description of hospice (ask hospice nurse or representative questions about hospice).
- II. After the hospice experience
 - D. Write an objective summary of the experience (as objective as possible, state what actually happened).
 - E. Write a subjective summary of the experience (your thoughts and feelings concerning the patient, nurse, and program, etc.).
 - F. State your recommendations for public awareness of hospice.
 - G. State your recommendations concerning this project for other students.
- III. Report
 - H. Typewritten neatly.
 - I. Complete within three weeks of the patient visit.

To grade the project, I placed point values for each item A through I. Since the content of the report was my primary interest, I was not concerned with the length of the report. The results of the project will be in the Student Scope July/August 1989 issue of *Radiologic Technology*. ☞

Attention

Would the student who submitted the article on MRI please contact Diane Newham immediately? Thank you.