

Our Profession in today's NHS

Dr Abigail Dunn

"Doctor, I've just been visiting my husband Mr Jones, and I was wondering if there was any chance I could get an update as to what's been going on?"

It is 5 minutes until the end of my shift. I still have at least an hour's work to do. An elderly woman in a lilac cardigan and silver-edged glasses is hovering at the other side of the doctor's desk on the main corridor of the ward. As I look up at her, I try to ignore the fact that my heart has just sunk a little at the sound of her request. I compose my face into one of professional interest instead of one of disappointment. As I look up at her, I see that her eyes are bright with tears. She is clearly making a concerted effort to retain her composure, standing in the middle of the busy ward corridor.

All thoughts of disappointment, fatigue, and stress disappear, and are replaced with an overwhelming desire to comfort her. I close my work and usher her into a quiet room, grabbing a handful of tissues on the way.

"They're NHS grade tissues so there's a small risk of scratching your eyes out, but they're all we've got I'm afraid."

I am rewarded with a weak laugh and a nose-blow into the offending tissue. The tears are now falling freely.

As the CT1 on the ward, I have looked after this lady's husband, Mr Jones, for the past few days. I remember that he is a gentleman in his 80s who has been admitted with a short history of agitation, confusion and verbal aggression, on a background of cognitive decline over the preceding few months. Our working diagnosis is new onset dementia, and he is currently being managed by the Medicine of the Elderly Ward team, with input from the Mental Health team. His wife is his primary contact, and he has previously given us permission to discuss his care with her.

"How much do you understand as to what's been going on?" I probe, gently.

She crumples her tissue in one hand.

"I know that his memory hasn't been so good these past few months, and the GP's been saying that it could be dementia. But he's just been absolutely nothing like himself the past few weeks! We've been married for nearly 60 years, and he's never so much as hurt a fly. But today, he was trying to hit the poor nurse who's been sitting with him all day- she hadn't done anything to provoke him, he just lashed out. And my daughter came to visit him, but he didn't know who she was. They used to be so close, they would each start a sentence off and then end up in fits of laughter over some joke I just didn't get. They were once in a world of their own, and now he doesn't even recognise her."

She dissolves into sobs, holding her head in her hands. I mumble something soothing and lay a hand on her shoulder to help steady her.

"We think that all of this behaviour is secondary to the dementia. I know it seems awful now, but you'll get through this. He's in the right place, we're doing all the right things, and we'll help him to

get more comfortable and settled. You'll both always have the support you need - we'll make sure that we have everything in place to manage things the way they need to be managed."

We sit together quietly. A few moments later, she takes a deep breath and shakes her head. "Sorry, Doctor. I know you must be busy..."

"Not at all."

She smiles at me. "Right, I'd best be going. My bus will be leaving soon and I'm late getting home as it is." She stands to leave.

"If you need anything else or just want to talk to somebody again, please do just grab one of us, or pick up the phone and call the ward, ok?" I tell her.

She nods head in thanks, and leaves the ward. I sit back down at my desk, head spinning a little.

"Everything good? That looked intense." My fellow junior doctor colleague, also staying late, looks sympathetically at me.

"Yes, thanks though. You know how it is."

He grimaces, nods, and turns back to his work. I resume my task of ordering bloods for the next day.

"You know how it is." This sometimes feels like the mantra of the junior doctor in today's NHS. The job is gruelling, challenging, emotionally draining. You'll feel overworked, stressed beyond belief, and totally inadequate. You'll get plucked from one task and thrown into another without warning, pulled in about 6 directions at once and exposed to some of the deepest fears and concerns of total strangers, who often have no idea how much their words can stick with you. With every hurdle, you pick yourself up, shake yourself off and move on to the next problem, the next challenge. You do so because at the end of the day you're driven by the desire to help people, care for people, and make their lives better- occasionally at the expense of your own. If we feel we are worn down by the innumerable tasks - the phonecalls, the investigation requests, the forms - all it takes is a call for help from someone, whether literal or unspoken, and we rally to respond. Across the country, not everyone has the means to access the healthcare they require. The NHS provides a way to help all those who need it, without discrimination. We are given the opportunity to provide the best standard of care we possibly can, without worrying about whether or not the person needing it, their families or their loved ones, can afford it.

The next day, Mrs Jones returns to the ward, to sit with her husband. I notice another woman sitting next to her, possibly in her 30s. I position myself at the doctor's desk, ready to start on a discharge letter.

"Doctor." A voice from the other side of the desk; the woman is standing there. "Doctor, I just wanted to say- Mum just pointed you out. You're the doctor who talked to her last night. She said she was in a complete state, and that you sat and listened to her. She said that it meant the world to her, and how grateful she was. So I just wanted to come and tell you that, and to say how grateful I am, too, for your help."

I feel suddenly lighter. I break out into a smile. "Thank you so much for saying that, it really means a lot to hear it."

The woman smiles back, then leaves to go sit with her mum.

My junior doctor colleague from last night is sitting next to me, and has witnessed the exchange. He laughs. "Bet that's made your day."

I return to my work, tapping away at the keyboard.

"Oh, you know how it is."