The Day Downstate Saved My Life

by Ron Howell
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Around this time last year, I was on the precipice of life, looking into the abyss.

Boerhaave's syndrome hits suddenly. It's like a heart attack but far rarer, involving the esophagus, which is ruptured from violent heaving; the lungs, which collapse from the volcanic disruption, and the midsection, which is filled with rushing fluids.

Though Boerhaave's has a 35% mortality rate, I came out on the surviving side—because the emergency team quickly got me to a hospital equipped with a capable cardiothoracic surgeon.

That hospital was Brooklyn's SUNY Downstate Medical Center, and the surgeon was Dr. Vinay Tak, whose words, after I awoke from the tedious operation, gave comfort: “Nothing you face in the coming weeks will equal what you’ve just been through.”

Today, I am gratefully taking in the pleasures and challenges of everyday life. And it might be said that I owe it all to Downstate.

When the ambulance got me to Downstate last February, my wife, Marilyn, was frantic because, though it was early on a Friday morning, the emergency area was thick with patients in pain, seeking the attention of doctors. We could hear all kinds of accents: Jamaican, Arabic, Spanish, Chinese.

Fortunately for me, through the confusion of it all, doctors realized the immediacy of my case, and frantic calls went out over the speakers for Dr. Tak, who would go on to do a job that makes

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A hospital stay for any length of time can be a stressful experience for children. For 40 years, Downstate’s Child Life Program has been helping youngsters overcome their fear and discomfort by means of therapeutic play. Now, thanks to the generosity of Child Life Technology, a philanthropic group of banking industry software developers and vendors, young patients at The Children’s Hospital of SUNY Downstate can enjoy a new way to pass the time and forget their cares. Lou Riccio, director of Child Life Technology, has donated four iPad Minis and four iPods to the Child Life Program, with the promise of four more of each to come. These hand-held devices will keep children happy and occupied during oncology treatments, dialysis, and other lengthy procedures.

Mr. Riccio and his group are also creating an electronic prep book for children and their parents. To be written in several languages and in a style appropriate for children, it aims to relieve their anxiety at the prospect of hospitalization by showing in advance who they will meet and what it will be like when they come in for treatment.

“We are grateful to Lou Riccio and his team for making our patients’ hospital stays easier,” said Lisa Smith, director of the Child Life and Parenting Education Program. She thanked Larry Riccio, an oncology admixture pharmacist consultant at Downstate who is Lou’s cousin, for proposing the project and helping to get it approved. She also gave much credit to Shawhan Ali, lead programmer analyst for Downstate’s Information Services, who assisted in its implementation.

Downstate’s International Nursing Affiliation Program

Tao Liu, RN MSN, CLC, assistant director of nursing, Department of Nursing Education, Professional Practice, and Research, recently welcomed three registered nurses from Beijing, China, who will be living on campus for three months to observe how we provide nursing care here. As coordinator for UHB’s International Nursing Affiliation Program, Ms. Liu has hosted five contingents of Chinese nurses since the program began in 2011.

“Our visitors from China are not licensed to practice here, but they can learn a great deal by shadowing our nurses as they make their daily rounds,” says Ms. Liu. “Nursing intervention and documentation requirements in China are very different than in the United States,” she explains. “In China, hospitals do not generally have nursing assistants, unit clerks, social workers, nutritionists, and rehabilitation therapists on staff, as we do here. There, nurses handle such roles.”

On April 11, Ms. Liu welcomed a second group of foreign observers from Holland. These observers, who all have advanced nursing degrees, were most interested in hearing about the level of autonomy and collaboration that exists between nurses and physicians in various specialty areas here, and about future trends in advanced nursing practice.

The International Nursing Affiliation Program offers experiences that equally benefit foreign observers and our nurses. “It’s a terrific opportunity to share ideas, promote cross-cultural understanding, and gain a broader perspective on global healthcare needs,” says Ms. Liu. “It’s a win-win for everyone involved.”
Superstorm Sandy Sends Patients to the PIRR

by Agnes Adams, RN, nurse manager, and the PIRR nursing staff as told to Dianne Forbes Woods, RN, MA, NE-BC Deputy Nursing Director

October 29th, 2012, is a day the Post Interventional Recovery Room (PIRR) staff will never forget. At the height of Hurricane Sandy, we admitted five very sick, long-term care patients from a nearby facility that had to evacuate its patients. All five patients were on ventilators and had feeding tubes and urinary catheters. One patient had a pressure ulcer; another required isolation for an infection.

This was a far cry from the kind of patients we were used to having on our unit. PIRR is an ambulatory unit for patients after they undergo interventional radiology procedures. For these five new patients, however, we recognized that the care they needed was very different. Maintaining open airways and preserving optimal skin integrity were of the utmost importance.

In addition to frequent tracheotomy suctioning, pulmonary toiletting, and oral care, we provided around-the-clock skin care. This meant repositioning patients every two hours, applying skin barrier creams, and promptly changing soiled linens to prevent pressure ulcers. We also washed their hair and gave them mani-pedis. On our own, we purchased the tools that were needed for the extra grooming.

By the end of the first week, we saw positive changes in our boarders. Their skin took on a healthy glow, they were more alert, and we were getting to know them as individuals and learning to anticipate their needs. Even the patient who had arrived with a deep pressure ulcer was showing signs of healing.

By week two, all urinary catheters were discontinued. One patient requested oral feedings instead of the feeding tube so she was evaluated and oral feedings were initiated. She tolerated the diet very well and ate with much gusto, so that marked the end of feeding tubes for her.

This same patient asked us to take her off the ventilator. The staff advocated on her behalf, collaborating with her medical team to attach a tracheostomy collar during the day and use the ventilator at night. By week three, we were able to completely wean her off the ventilator and she was breathing on her own. Week four brought our greatest accomplishment. The pressure ulcer had healed completely.

It was difficult to care for these five patients while also attending to our outpatient procedures. We couldn’t have done it without the help of nurses who floated to our “Li’l Nursing Home,” as it was affectionately called, during the weeks our boarders were here.

When it came time to say goodbye, we all felt a sense of pride and accomplishment knowing that we gave these patients our best care, along with lots of extra love and attention. They were transferred back to their long-term facility with skin intact, looking wonderful, and knowing they had occupied a special place in our hearts.

Honoring a Special Volunteer

Rose Carter is congratulated by Daniel Graves, who nominated her for UHF’s Hospital Auxilian and Volunteer Achievement Award.

Each year, the United Hospital Fund (UHF) recognizes exceptional New Yorkers who give selflessly of their time to serve as hospital volunteers. This year, UHF recognized Rosella (Rose) Carter, who has volunteered at SUNY Downstate for the past 10 years. Unfortunately, Ms. Carter was unable to attend the UHF’s special award ceremony at the Waldorf Astoria because her grandson was getting married that day. Given the choice between celebrating her own achievement and her grandson’s special day, Rose never thought twice.

Rose began her volunteer work at Downstate in 2001. For 20 years, she had been the sole caregiver of a granddaughter who was severely handicapped. “When she died, I felt the need to help others,” Rose recalls. “I wanted to be part of a place where people care about other people and to make a difference in their lives. I found what I was looking for at Downstate.”

Beginning as a volunteer in the physical therapy department, she later joined the Volunteer Office, helping to register others like herself under the guidance of Chandra Brownley, volunteer coordinator, and Daniel Graves, director of admitting and volunteer services. Rose believes they both deserve praise for providing a meaningful way for young people and seniors to contribute by doing volunteer work.

“I am always greeted with a smile and a hello,” she says. “I hear ‘thank you’ after each task. But at the end of the day, I say ‘thank you’ for allowing me to be part of a winning team. When will I stop volunteering? When the fat lady sings. Life is good, but giving back is even better.”
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the word “surgeon” so commanding of respect.

Of course, it wasn’t only the operating physician who stood out. Nurses were there day and night, checking every beep of the machines by my bed and the connections of the tubes I felt in so many different parts of my body.

It gave me special satisfaction, during my two weeks in intensive care at Downstate, to interact with medical students and residents who accompanied attending physicians on their rounds. I engaged them in conversation and was pleased to meet so many who were graduates of Brooklyn College, where I’ve been teaching journalism the past four years.

Editor’s note: In conversation with Professor Howell, he added these remarks: “I’m back at work thanks to the dedication of my wonderful medical team. I’m also indebted to my cousin, Dr. Sydney Butts, a facial plastic and reconstructive surgeon at Downstate, who took time out from her own busy schedule to watch over me while I was recovering.”

Meet Dr. Vinay Tak
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the noted cardiovascular surgeon who invented the Starr heart valve.

Dr. Tak joined Downstate in 2007. Since being named interim division chief four years ago, he has elevated cardiothoracic surgery to a new level of excellence. Whether in the operating room or at the patient’s bedside, he leads by example.

“If I see something that should not be there, even if it is only a paper on the floor, I will remove it—and make certain that my staff sees me doing it.”

Dr. Tak describes Downstate as “a diamond in the rough”—often under-recognized and under-appreciated. “Many people don’t realize until they come here that our cardiac services are as good as or better than anywhere else,” he says.

This fact is not lost on the hospital staff, several of whom have referred family members to his care. Not long ago, Jasmine Lambert, RN, persuaded her brother-in-law, Arnold Palmer, to make the hazardous AirVac trip from Nassau in the Bahamas, because she had faith that Dr. Tak—and only Dr. Tak—could save him. Mr. Palmer underwent emergency surgery for an acute aortic dissection that could have ruptured at any time, but in the end he went home with his health and life restored.

National Nurses Week
May 6-12*
“Delivering Quality and Innovation in Patient Care”

May 6
Opening Ceremony
10-11 am, UHB steps at 445 Lenox Road

*See the Downstate Calendar for the week-long program of events.

National Hospital Week
May 18
27th Annual Community Health Fair
11 am-3 pm, 444 Lenox Road (E. 35th – E. 37th Streets)

Free health screenings, information, and entertainment

AROUND DOWNSTATE

Downstate Celebrates Women’s History Month

At the Women’s History Month celebration on March 21, we recognized the achievements of 20 campus members who are this year’s Extraordinary Women of Downstate. One of them, JoAnn Bradley, EdD, senior vice president for philanthropy, received special honors for her many years of dedicated service to Downstate.