

# Nurses Are the Heart and Soul of Medicine

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admin

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A few weeks ago, I wrote about the most important nurse in my life, my mother. This week, I'd like to focus on a few other important nurses who have helped me along my Crohn's journey.

An Dube, Jennifer "Jen" Tiemann, and Heather Atkinson work in the infusion and endoscopy centers for Austin Gastroenterology. Except for the brief period when I was seeing my gastroenterologist once a month, I often see these three nurses more than I do my doctor when I go in for my Remicade (infliximab) infusions every eight weeks. Because of this, they were the ones who immediately knew something was terribly wrong with me a couple of weeks before I had my liver transplant.

When I walked into the infusion center for my Remicade appointment, An and Jen noticed I was extremely jaundiced. They were so concerned that they didn't want to start my infusion without first consulting my gastroenterologist. I had just seen my doctor two weeks earlier, so he told them to give me half of my prescribed dose because he didn't want to risk the possibility of a flare.

After that day, I didn't see my nurses for more than four months. I went out of my way to visit them following my first appointment with my gastroenterologist after my transplant. I not only wanted them to see how healthy I was again, but I also wanted to thank them for being fantastic nurses and taking care of me. An, Jen, and Heather wouldn't have recognized how sick I was had they not developed a relationship with me over the years. When I asked them about their jobs at my infusion two weeks ago, they told me that the relationships they build are what they love most about working with IBD patients.

Because of the regularity of infusion appointments and the 2 1/2 hours it takes to administer the treatment, the infusion nurses get to know patients on a more personal level. All three ladies agreed that seeing the same patients regularly and watching them get better is the best part of the job.

An explained that patients are usually very sick when they first come in and begin infusion treatments. Jen said that as nurses, they often see patients at their worst, and seeing them in remission is a great feeling. "I like to see people get healthy," Heather added.

The key to all good relationships is communication. The nurses stressed the importance of patients educating themselves about their disease and treatments.

"Some patients have trouble understanding they have a chronic disease," Heather said. She advises patients to listen to their body and notice what works and what doesn't, and to have the presence of mind to let the doctor know these things. "I hate for patients to be in pain," she said. "If they come in with questions, we can tailor treatments to their needs."



From left, An Dube and Jen Tiemann. (Photo by Emmeline Olson)

Honesty is also key to receiving effective treatment. “Patients need to understand to share symptoms with us because that helps us advocate for the patient with the doctor,” An said. When patients don’t tell the nurses that they’re experiencing problems, the medical team assumes the treatment is working when it might not be.

To avoid setbacks in treatment, Jen, An, and Heather also recommended that patients be proactive. All of them emphasized the importance of patients staying on top of their annual TB test, which is required to receive some of the medications used to treat IBD. Because infusion appointments are set weeks or even months in advance, patients need to be sure their TB results are up to date to avoid having to reschedule, thus prolonging treatment and the opportunity to get better.

Another tip the nurses offered to ensure a smoother infusion appointment is for patients to be well-hydrated when they come in. This helps start the IV site for the infusion. In addition to drinking a lot of water a day or two before infusion, the nurses recommended that patients drink coconut water to help with hydration.

Patient attitude is another aspect the nurses said influences their workday. Patients with negative attitudes are the most challenging. However, they agreed that most patients are low-maintenance, which makes their job easier and more enjoyable. “It’s a good job,” Jen said. “I like what we do. It’s not so much about our nursing skills but making our patients feel important in the short time that we see them.”

Nurse Appreciation Week was at the beginning of May. As the month draws to a close, I'm glad I have this outlet to highlight and honor the nurses in my life.

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