

Do This For Your Friend

Go to Seattle Cancer Care Alliance. Walk up the sloped sidewalk. Don't look at the huddle of patients waiting for the shuttle to cancer housing. Enter the whoosh doors. Move toward the front desk and squirt hand sanitizer into your hands. Rub your hands. Don't look at heads covered with bright scarves or wool watch caps. Don't look at gaunt bodies, or gray faces. Don't look into tired eyes. Especially don't look at the little boy, ghost pale, pecking at a game on his iPod, perhaps a gift from his family when he came here to get a miracle bone marrow.

Take the elevator. Find Sandi and give her a hug. Billie and Carol, too. Shake hands with Muriel and watch her assess you as you assess her. Sit together on pastel chairs, love seats, and recliners in the sea-green waiting room with tall windows overlooking all of summer-busy, urban Lake Union with Queen Anne Hill, Gasworks Park, and Wallingford beyond.

Stand when Sandi's name is called. Go into the exam room with Sandi, Billie, Carol, and Muriel. Meet Nurse Susan. Watch Sandi take off her purple satin blouse to reveal her brand-new, shiny blue bra that you know she bought for this training session. Turn your attention to the tube coming out of Sandi's chest, right through her bronze African skin, just inches below her neck. Hear that this tube is Sandi's central line. It is her venous access, her port through which all fluids flow: chemo, plasma, platelets, nutrition, hydration, and stem cells. Understand that this line flows straight into Sandi's vein, and the vein flows straight to her heart.

Receive your copy of *Care of the Central Line*. Listen to Nurse Susan tell you that infections can kill, that the way a transplant patient gets an infection is most often from a caregiver. Hear her say if a transplant patient gets an infection, then that patient is no longer eligible for transplant, the last best chance gone. Vow that you will never give Sandi an infection.

Watch Nurse Susan demonstrate hand washing for a full minute, which equals three rounds of "Happy Birthday" at a stately adagio tempo, say 72 on the metronome. Watch Nurse Susan put on sterile gloves before touching the end of the tube—the clave. Watch her unscrew the cap from the clave. Watch Nurse Susan open an alcohol wipe and clean the clave. Then watch her clean the end of a syringe of saline solution. Fifteen seconds for each cleaning. Then watch her squeeze a bubble out of the syringe and screw the syringe into the clave. See her open the tube clamp with her left hand at the same time that she squeezes the syringe with her right. See saline flow into Sandi's central line. Give full attention. Remember.

Your turn. Wash your hands to adagio "Happy Birthday" three times. Imagine Sandi will have three more birthdays as part of her bargain with multiple myeloma, with transplant, with her own bones and blood. Scrub antibacterial soap between your fingers and under your cut-short-for-this-purpose nails. Dry your hands and put on sterile gloves. Hear Sandi tease you, but also hear her trust.

Steady your hands. Unscrew the syringe from the clave at the end of Sandi's tube. Toss the syringe. Clean the clave for fifteen seconds. Open the

heparin syringe. Force the bubble out. Clean the top of the syringe for 15 seconds. Screw the syringe to the clamp. Release the clamp. Push the syringe. Breathe. Look at Sandi and see her grin. Hear Billie say, “Janet, you could have been a nurse.” Pretend it is true. Know that it’s not. Now unscrew the syringe. Toss. Take the gloves off. Toss. Put on new gloves. Open the wipe. Wipe the clamp for 15 seconds. Cap the clamp. Breathe.

Look at Sandi. Try to understand why she looks radiant and the rest of you look as if your red blood cells have been sucked out. Realize you do not have what it takes to be the patient in this room.

Accept that you now know how to care for a central line, a little anyway. Take the nurse hotline number and place it in your wallet. Keep it there through infusions of killer chemo, of early harvest stem cells, of nutrients, of blood products, of new drug concoctions—cocktails of hope. Keep it there when Sandi is too nauseated to even drink water, through months of neuropathy, night sweats, insomnia, hair loss, and bone pain. Keep it there through this cherished, fleeting time.

Hear Nurse Susan ask Muriel if she wants to flush the central line, since she is staying with Sandi first. Hear Muriel decline. Later, tell Sandi you will come over any time she wants. Hear Sandi say she can do all this shit herself. Say, “Okay, that’s great,” but make her promise to call you if she needs help. Over time, realize that Sandi can take care of her central line herself, almost always. Know that you were trained because it was required.

Thank Nurse Susan. Watch Sandi tuck her clamp into her bra and button up her purple blouse. Listen to her joke about having an extra boob, an extra-high-maintenance boob. Laugh. Walk out of the room. Go down the elevator and out of the clinic. Watch Sandi and Muriel head off in Sandi’s Saab. Hear Sandi make Muriel laugh. Imagine they are heading off for Sandi and Muriel’s wild and crazy summer, instead of a stem cell transplant.

Call Sandi later, just to hear her voice. Know that you will wash your hands to “Happy Birthday,” that you will put on gloves, that you will wipe with alcohol anything that touches Sandi’s central line, that you will do this as many times as it takes to keep this woman safe.

Learn to just be with Sandi. Drive her to Cancer Care Alliance. Sit with her during infusion. Pick up her prescriptions. Bring her chicken soup, Thai pad see-ew, or Mongolian beef. Know that Sandi has many helpers. Listen to her talk about each person you both know and people only Sandi knows. Receive her deep take on human nature, drawn straight from the marrow. Hold close your time with Sandi. Make her laugh. Write with Sandi each Sunday. Always write, even after Sandi is gone. Do this for your friend.

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