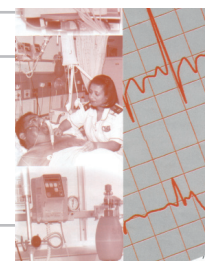


Critical Care nurses ground down? No way, more like freshly ground



In my critical care career I have worked with some clinical teams who, instead of making instant coffee at break times, bring out freshly ground coffee beans and make a steaming pot of fresh coffee for staff to enjoy and take stock in their busy schedule. I am a fervent tea drinker, but even I am won over by the smell of freshly ground coffee. Its aroma is intoxicating and invigorating. The smell is complex and arrests the senses, bringing to mind an excitement that touches the heart.

Now some of you may be wondering, what has this got to do with critical care nursing? The link is my experience at the recent Critical Care and Thoracic Society Conference, 'Building from Basics', held in Cape Town in August this year. I was privileged to be an invited international speaker and, in preparing my papers, I took counsel from friends and colleagues, and learnt of the challenges in delivering health care in South Africa. The magnitude of some of these (including the current staffing crisis) seemed overwhelming. It made me wonder how critical care nurses in South Africa managed their work in such environments. What impact would this have on morale? Were nurses ground down by such pressures?

My resounding response is – no way! I was totally overwhelmed by my experiences while in South Africa. The conference itself was held in the fantastic International Convention Centre, Cape Town. It had an amazingly diverse programme, exploring contemporary practice in sepsis, thoracic surgery/pulmonology, cardiovascular, paediatrics, HIV, resuscitation, critical care education, critical care research, ethics, nutrition and much, much more. Just under 150 papers were presented over the four days, with up to five concurrent sessions running each day. It was a fantastic opportunity to hear of clinical issues in South Africa, and indeed across the world.

In addition to these strands, critical care nurses had dedicated ICU management, nursing practice, education and nursing free paper sections to attend. I was privileged to hear nurses present work they were undertaking, and to talk with nurses who, despite extreme pressures, continued to commit to improving care of critically ill patients in local units. This energy and drive became particularly tangible in the final session of the conference at the Nursing Indaba, where the vision for critical care nursing was



Maureen Coombs, guest speaker at the 'Building from Basics' conference, with Jos Latour and Rencia Gillespie.

discussed. It is difficult to really capture my experience of the conference. I can talk about the nature of the programme. I can highlight the commitment and motivation from the nurses present. And I support the call for each of us to take personal responsibility to lead change in patient care and in working with clinical colleagues. But that is not enough ...

For me, the spirit of the conference, and of critical care nurses, was seen in how nurses worked and talked together. Yes, even on the dance floor! At one social event the fantastic group Freshly Ground played music that was a fusion of traditional South African, blues, jazz and indie rock. Their music was powerful and drew critical care nurses from all over the globe onto the floor. As we danced, we were brought into a united collective, each of us with our own style, all from different backgrounds, all with different challenges, but all with the same focus and same passion and excitement at that moment in time. It was uplifting and exciting. Seeing that much energy put into dancing just spoke to the heart. And while such 'freshly ground' qualities remain in critical care nurses, there will always be hope for the future.

Of course, it is so easy to be enthusiastic when one is away from the reality of the workplace. The major challenge is how to take that enthusiasm back into everyday care at the bedside. So I will leave you with this piece of information. You will have noticed that there is a theme running through this guest editorial – that of freshly ground and coffee. There is a current



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theory¹ that the smell of coffee can restore appetite and refresh olfactory receptors after prolonged cooking. My hope is that hard-working critical care nurses coming to this conference after prolonged periods of caring for the critically ill will have their receptors refreshed and be ready to continue their work with the energy and motivation that are so essential to the patients and families we care for.

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1. Dorri Y, Maryam S, Kurein BT. Awaken olfactory receptors of humans and experimental animals by coffee odourants to induce appetite. *Med Hypoth* 2007; 69(3): 508-509.

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