



ILLUSTRATION: SANDRA DIONIISI

What nursing means to me...

“AS A REGISTERED NURSE FOR PATIENTS WITH CHRONIC ILLNESSES, I’m regularly challenged to give people the skills they need to look after themselves. Turns out nothing gives me quite the same sense of professional satisfaction as watching patients slowly but surely attain a sense of control over their ailing health.

One woman in particular stands out. I was working in a rheumatology clinic when I met Bernadette. The 23-year-old had just been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, which causes painful inflammation and joint destruction. She was devastated about having a chronic condition, and was about to face her first trial. She’d been prescribed a very effective medication that needed to be injected twice a week. She was petrified of needles.

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When I told her I’d been asked to teach her how to give herself intramuscular injections, she turned ashen and burst into tears. She exclaimed: “I hate needles, they hurt so much, there’s no way I can do it!” When she realized she had little choice, she was scared but resolved to learn.

Passing along the knowledge to Bernadette was one thing (an injection, given with good technique – a swift confident move of the wrist, puncturing the skin, pushing the plunger, discharging the medicine – should not hurt). Giving her the confidence she would need was another thing altogether.

Step by step, I began to educate her. I started with a diagram of the skin’s anatomy and explained the function of the different layers and where the needle needed to go. Then we moved on to how to pull back and push in on the plunger using an empty syringe, and other helpful techniques. Bernadette gave her first injection to an orange, and while she practised, we perfected the angle of the needle.

And then the big day arrived: Bernadette was ready to give herself an injection. Sitting in front of me, her hands shook a little as she swabbed her thigh with an alcohol wipe. I sat on the edge of my chair, waiting to jump in if she needed help, but holding back, knowing that it was up to Bernadette to take the next step.

She drew in a big breath, held the skin and pierced it, pushed the plunger, and withdrew the needle, in one smooth move. I don’t think she let out her breath until she was finished. She exhaled and said, “Wow, I did it!”

Witnessing her relief and joy, I was immensely gratified, as I am on every occasion when patients recognize they are neither helpless nor passive in their own care. I’m constantly struck by how collaborative nursing can be with patients, and I look forward to every opportunity to inspire confidence in my skill and in those I’m passing skill along to.” **RN**

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