

Bill and Jean: A Lifetime Together

Tina Vallier, RN, BSN, OCN®

I was preparing to educate a new patient about chemotherapy but, before I headed into the room we use for educating patients, I was greeted by the nurse who works with the oncologist. She said, “You are going to like this couple, kind of simple but really nice. Ask him about his surgery.” Okay, I think to myself, I cannot wait to hear this tale. I was expecting to hear about the hours and hours of surgery and the details of the intricate procedure performed to remove his extensive head and neck can-

I was part of their family. Now, I felt like I really needed to be there for them. Now that they both had cancer, they worried about each other and, at times, they neglected themselves for the other.

Jean finished treatment; however, soon after, Bill started to significantly decline. At this point, this couple had been coming to the clinic three times per week for more than a year—over 100 visits. Every time, Jean and Bill ordered lunch—a treat for both of them. Then the day came when we had to say goodbye to Bill. “The hospice nurses will take good care of you,” I told him. We watched sadly as the worry developed on Jean’s tired face and, for the first time, she didn’t place a lunch order. Tears filled our eyes. By now, we had been taking care of this family for more than two years.

I often wonder how patients get along after they are done with their treatment in my clinic, and it was no different with this couple. It was hard to let go after so many days together. One Thursday, I heard that Bill had gone directly from home to the hospice care facility—in other words, the last stop. That Saturday, driving from a meeting in the area of the hospice facility, I decided to stop in. Now, I normally protect myself from too many visits outside of work and tell myself, “Another day would be better.” However, that Saturday was different—there was

no hesitation, no excuse. I turned down the road to the hospice facility and went inside. The volunteer at the front desk normally tells you the room number, but not this time. Instead, she asked me my name and then left me waiting while she went to the chapel. When she returned, I was ushered into the chapel and found Jean sitting with her step-daughter and step-grandson. Jean was in apparent emotional distress as Bill had passed away just 20 minutes earlier. Jean clung to me and held my hand the whole three-plus hours we sat there in the chapel. Then we went back into the room where Bill’s lifeless body lay, so peaceful. Beside the bed, his best friend—his wife, Jean—looked at him. She had watched him struggle because he did not want to leave her, and now he was at peace.

After Bill’s death, the staff in our clinic knew that Jean would be staying with her sister in another state. When we were finally able to call her, she was in the hospital again, this time with advanced disease from her colon cancer. Frail and weak on the phone, she wanted to receive her care back home, with us, but she knew she needed to be with her sister and family. We heard six weeks later that she too had passed. We were not surprised. Somehow, we knew that it would not be long as she and Bill had such a strong bond.

I have never felt so blessed.

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cer. I walked into our education room and was greeted by a very slight older man with a big toothless smile and, alongside him, his graying wife, both with the same welcoming warmth. As the nurse suggested, I asked about the surgery before starting my chemotherapy education. I found myself amazed. Bill’s answer: “And you know my tongue was growing hair and I had to shave it off?” From that point on, I was in love with this couple.

For more than a year, Bill received harsh chemotherapy and radiation therapy. He suffered numerous setbacks that required hospitalization. He had a hard time finishing the regimen, so it was changed to a chemotherapy that he could tolerate. It was not even a year into Bill’s therapy when we got the news that Jean had been diagnosed with colon cancer. How could this happen to such a loving, beautiful couple? From day one, I felt like

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