

**Most Powerful Round: Ashford and St Peter's NHS Foundation Trust**  
**Dr Clare Smith and the Schwartz Team**

‘The Hospital Wedding’- All in a day’s work?



*The most powerful round?* What a difficult question! Each time 2pm rolls round and my monthly fix of Schwartz is coming to an end I have always been moved by the panel’s stories and audience reflection. Every Schwartz round is powerful to me, and I leave in a combined state of exhaustion and rejuvenation. We often cry in Schwartz, it is the accepted norm, and this one was set to be no different.

**The build up**

It’s not often that we have a wedding in the Multi-faith Centre at our District General Hospital. So it was no surprise that this cherished occasion was suggested as a focus for our Valentine’s Day Schwartz Round.

In Schwartz we can so often focus on the difficult negative emotions and stresses of working in health care. So, this was a welcomed opportunity for a panel to share their joy and pride in caring, and the positive impact they had on a patient at the end of her life. Not forgetting her everlasting impact on them. Some patients stay with you and she was one. This Schwartz was to be a tearful celebration.

The panel pre-meet went well. The palliative care FY1, the gastroenterology FY1, one of the palliative care CNSs and the Lead Acute Oncology CNS were set to make up the panel. The story seemed a powerful one, each individual panel members perspective important, with a different range of feelings and emotions surrounding the experience.

Then, on Schwartz day, two panel members call in sick. As the facilitator my heart sinks and I am in a panic. However, this story touched many in the hospital, I turn to the pastoral care team for help, and the Chaplain steps up. One emergency pre-meet later, I have calmed down and the stage is set.

**The Story**

The palliative care nurse speaks first. She sets the scene. The oncology team and palliative care team had both been involved in the care of a lady called Jean<sup>1</sup>. She was 81 years old, full of life and had been having chemotherapy for metastatic stomach cancer. She was however still living her life and had been very well prior to admission. The palliative care nurse was on call at a weekend and asked to see Jean to help with symptoms of vomiting. This turned out, unfortunately, to be due to irreversible bowel obstruction. Jean did not have long to live. Despite this, she touched the nurse, telling her in great detail about her life and long-term romance with her now fiancé, Robert. Jean told how Robert was also 81, they had been in love since their 20’s however circumstances had prevented them marrying. Jean had over 2000 love letters in her attic from Robert. The palliative care nurse described how Jean was a special person who touched her heart and just how privileged she felt to be involved in Jean’s care.

She then went onto describe how, with the realization that death was just around the corner, both Jean and Robert spoke to her separately and told of how important it was for them to be married before she died. This was a Sunday; the nurse was compelled to make this happen and spent the next few days frantically organizing this. She describes bringing the palliative medicine consultant to

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed to maintain anonymity

see Jean and with great team effort of ward staff, specialty teams and chaplaincy, the wedding date was set for Wednesday. Wednesday was her day off, which was a disappointment. The consultant was keen for Jean to be transferred to the hospice and marry there. On the day of the wedding, Jean is offered a hospice bed. With the registrars prepared to marry Jean and Robert either at St Peters or the hospice this is good news. Isn't it? Not for Jean, she wants to stay at St Peters and be married surrounded by staff she knows. The staff had connected with Jean on a human level and this was more important than the surroundings. This made the nurse feel very proud of her St Peter's team. The nurse tells how she was at home on her day off and got a phone call from her team. The palliative medicine consultant had asked Jean who was on her invitation list for the wedding – she had named this nurse!! Filled with overwhelming privilege and feeling special, the nurse comes in on her day off but not after taking another call from the chaplain to ask her to bring a colourful scarf for Jean to wear. She describes the wedding itself as beautiful, full of joy, pure love and happiness.

The palliative care FY1 then speaks. She has been qualified as a doctor for approximately six months, working with the palliative care team for just over a month. A wedding was not on the list of things she had expected to be organising as part of her day job. She describes how she had probably only spent a total of an hour or so of her time with Jean. However, this had been intense discussing end of life wishes and concerns. She too was on Jean's invitation list, this had come as a surprise and she felt very special, touched and heartened by this gesture. She spoke with pride that the team were able to fulfil Jean's end of life wishes and was also very proud of her FY1 colleague in Gastroenterology whom too was on Jean's invite list and came to work in a new shirt for the occasion. The FY1 told how she has only ever attended one wedding in her life outside of work, so the experience was uplifting. In the ceremony the FY1 felt very emotional, overwhelmed with happiness. She felt she was witnessing an outpouring of pure love, diagnosis and prognosis forgotten. This was a honour she wasn't expecting.

The Chaplain then tells her reflections, she echoes the other panel members, and then goes onto describe eloquently how if we, the St Peter's team, were doing this wedding, we were going to make it an occasion – catering, clothing, flowers, drinks, including prosecco on a sponge for the bride. She could see and feel the compassion from all the staff members for this lady. Everyone pulled out all the stops and she felt honoured to be a part of this team. There was in her words 'Not a dry eye in the house'. Joyful tears, the team were witnessing a deep intimate exchange of love, with no sadness attached just overwhelming happiness and this was uplifting for everyone there (patient, family and staff). She felt blessed to play her part.

The word 'special' was uttered by each panel member many times- I counted the word- after I got to 10 -I stopped counting. The day was special, the patient special and the panel felt special.

### **Time to Reflect**

A member from the floor speaks, he reflects how the panel had only known Jean for a few days, but she had still chosen them as significant in her life and part of her important person group. This epitomized by her 'invite' list to her wedding. He remarks, with much audience agreement, that as health care professionals we are in a position of privilege. It is not the length of the interaction but the quality of it that counts to patients and families. There are many comments of thanks from the audience to the panel for sharing this joyful beautiful story so candidly. The feeling is that the panel went above and beyond what is expected in their daily duties.

A consultant surgeon in the audience then described that for him the privilege of patient trust and intimacy comes, at times, as a great responsibility. He elegantly paralleled his 'run of the mill' elective surgery with the panel's story. For him, surgery is 'all in a day's work' but for parents of the

children he operates on it is all consuming and overwhelming. He is reminded of this daily as parents leave the anesthetic room in tears. Trust is powerful. The surgeon goes on to tell how at times his adult patients have more confidence in him than he does himself. This can lead to immense pressure. There is a touching vulnerability behind his honest disclosure.

A member of the hospital executive team then asks 'Is this above and beyond? Or is it 'run of the mill – just another day at work?'. The panel and audience were split in their responses. All reflecting yes, we can always only do the bare minimum. We would have 'ticked the box' in fulfilling Jean end of life wishes if we'd simply arranged for the registrars to marry her to long term love Robert. However, the feeling was so very strong that we didn't come into this profession to 'tick a box'. We are drawn to do the best we possibly can in every situation. A Hospital Wedding is no different. That is why on the day there was flowers, cake, music and prosecco.

An audience member then speaks. He had recently been on the 'other side' with his daughter. He is close to tears as he recollects the significant moments in his daughter's hospital admission. All these moments are ones of human interaction, compassion for the patient (his daughter) and her situation. Staff enquiring about his daughter's welfare when they saw him in the corridor, hugging her goodbye and showing genuine delight at improvements in her health. It is said with such emotion that all of us in the room feel his every word. We acknowledge as a team that every interaction counts and will be remembered. We have a responsibility during every procedure, test or investigation to not just do the task but to 'be' alongside that patient.

There are multiple comments from the floor about how we should celebrate the good we do in the NHS more often, and how a thank you to a colleague goes a long long way. A pediatrician stands up and describes the concept in Pediatrics of 'Good News Friday', a routine to celebrate good care or team work on a weekly basis. There is enthusiasm for this.

Jean went on to die 10 days later in the hospice. However, although this story was about a dying lady, there was no sadness in the Schwartz round itself. We all leave the room ready for the rest of the day, a spring in our step, proud to work in healthcare and provide to work at St Peters.

### **The After**

I go back to my desk and check my email. There is an email from the Lead AOS nurse, who is at home sick. She still takes time to write her Schwartz story. She sums up the mood of this powerful Schwartz round perfectly.

*She writes 'For me I found the whole experience very emotional, it was the first marriage I have been involved in throughout my 32 years of nursing, been to many funerals but this was a first, it will always have a special place in my heart for two very special people.....People often ask how I do my job, there is sometimes not a lot of joy in my work day, but days like these are the reason, to be able to support patients and families and go the extra mile. The whole experience I think exemplifies the dedication of the St Peter's staff, to come together and provide a forever memorable marriage for all involved..... I am proud to be a nurse at St Peter's and work with some very special people, people who make a difference'.*

In this world of winter pressures, high expectations and staff shortages, working in the NHS may not always feel a joy or a pleasure. This powerful Schwartz round was a timely reminder that focusing on the human encounter can bring joy to our day. Anyone working in the NHS; health care professionals, catering or portering staff, have a unique gift to impart- to care with compassion in every interaction, every time, and this can feel phenomenal for everyone.