

Most Powerful Schwartz Round

Risking the Extra Mile

Hosting Schwartz Rounds in care homes has brought welcome opportunities for the voices of front line staff to be heard and valued. 'Risking the extra mile' gave voice to 2 nurses from different care homes, sharing stories of care, and brought to the fore the emotive issues of personal and professional boundaries in care. When does 'going the extra mile' become clinical risk-taking?

Safia, a nurse, tells the story of a man whose deteriorating neurological condition meant his ability to swallow had become unsafe. She described the repeated and frustrating efforts to communicate with his family that they couldn't give him the treats and preferred foods which were so important for their sense of being able to provide love and care. The speech therapist had formalised the restriction to a soft diet only and this was now part of the much revered 'care plan'. To try and encourage him to eat it was felt a communal setting might help, and he was dutifully wheeled into the dining room. But he pushed away his plate of unrecognizable pureed foods away, asking instead for "real food" like that of his neighbour. In that moment Safia realised the internal "tug of war" she was experiencing between sticking to the care plan and responding to the compassion she was feeling. "Who am I to deny him the comfort of being able to eat?"

"I am not a rule breaker" says Safia earnestly as she explains her position, seemingly seeking self-justification as much as the realisation that she is opening her choices up to the appraisal of the audience. "But seeing him there surrounded by everyone else eating, I just felt so bad". Nods of understanding from the audience encourage her to continue, "so I gave him what he asked for", and prayed that no-one would see, and that he wouldn't choke and die. She goes on to describe the feelings of guilt and uncertainty that she has been carrying with her, wondering always what the 'right' thing to do would have been.

The second story is from Dorothy, a nurse with decades of experience in caring for the elderly and frail. She tells of a resident with papery thin skin who is at high risk of developing pressure sores, and whose wheelchair-time is meant to be restricted. Her daughter is on a rare visit from Australia and begs to be able to take her mother out for lunch. Dorothy is aware of the risk that she is taking in agreeing to this request. "I knew what my manager would say" she says pausing, but "how could I say no?" I knew this may be the last time they ever spent together. The duo return back after sharing this meal and moments, and the next day a small pressure area is discovered on her sacrum. "I knew it was my fault" says Dorothy, "but it was my decision and I stick to it".

Conversation turns to the way differing values can become conflicted. "Surely there is more to life than just maintaining biological function?" A GP in the audience was reminded of Atul Gawande's challenge from his book *Being Mortal* that making life meaningful in old age is not at all the same goal as keeping someone 'safe'. There seem to be different opinions about when 'going the extra mile' might become 'crossing the line'.

The desire to “go beyond the call of duty” is picked up by several carers in the audience, and seems to connect many to their sense of purpose. One senior nurse, Carole is reminded of a centenarian resident who has been in the home for years. She senses somehow that the end may be drawing near and calls round to the family to let them know. Her much beloved son is unable to visit but Carole instinctively feels like her resident “won’t let go” until she has connected to her son. But over the phone she strongly pleads with him to say the words that he finds so difficult to articulate. Just hours after hearing “I love you” from her son, the mother passes peacefully away. Several members of the audience are moved to tears.

Typically the care home environment is one overshadowed by regulation and scrutiny, which bears the fruit of fear, anxiety and disempowerment. But today’s discussion brings to light the courage in the hearts of carers who take risk on behalf of the people they serve.

Closing remarks from a receptionist seemed to resonate with the whole room as she reflected on the inspiration of those carers who were “expressing humanity without fear”. She went on further to say “when it is my time I hope there will be someone to give me the meal I want, keep me in the chair to see my daughter, and get my son to say he loves me”.

Both panelists acknowledge the relief that is felt in sharing and indeed discharging the ‘guilt’ they have been carrying, and finding understanding from their peers. For me, this Round embodies the heart of the Schwartz philosophy, where the personal and professional are found to be much less separable than we like to think, and where the common value of our humanity is recognized and valued.



Attendees at Schwartz round in September 2018