

Colleen Carberry



Nursing through a pandemic

Throughout her more than 20-year career as a hospice care nurse, Colleen Carberry has never appreciated the healing power of a smile—or a touch—more than she does now.

In the midst of a pandemic, she still provides in-person care for patients approaching end of life and comforts their families. But she can no longer hold their hands or give them a hug. And with a mask covering her face during visits, she can no longer even share a smile.

That affects what she sees as a central part of her work. "I love caring for my patients and their families," Colleen says. "I like to love on their mind, body, and spirit."

Carberry is one of thousands of frontline care workers who are taking risks each day to attend to the needs of their patients. In the first few months of the pandemic, she did not have any covid-positive patients, but she saw first-hand how the threat of the virus is dramatically transforming care for millions of older adults even through their final days.

A coincidental start to nursing

Colleen started her nursing career 27 years ago. At the time, she was a recent college graduate working at a surf shop in Virginia Beach when one of her coworkers brought in a brochure for nursing school orientation. Colleen agreed to attend the orientation and found a lasting fit.

She was drawn to hospice care early on because of the intimacy of the work, she says. After working as a nurse care manager and educating doctors, nursing homes, and hospitals about hospice care, she wanted to focus on direct patient interactions and she took a job at Capital Caring Health, the largest non-profit provider of elder health, advanced illness, hospice, and at-home care services for the Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. area.

"There is something beautiful about holding someone's hand as they take their last breath," Colleen says. "It moves me to see my patients smile and relax as they cross that threshold and are finally comfortable again."

An emphasis on touch

The novel coronavirus has made it more difficult to share in those intimate moments. Physical distancing protocols are taking a toll on her patients and their families.

In assisted living, she sees family members come to the window of the facility in order to “hold hands” with their loved ones, some of whom don’t understand why they cannot be hugged in person.

The changes are especially difficult for patients with dementia, who rely more on facial recognition and facial cues for connection. “The masks may seem scary to them,” she says. “They are confused.”

Without the ability to smile or hold hands, she is spending more time in conversation with patients and families and trying to show her empathy through active listening.

“I believe that the job of a nurse is to comfort and give peace,” she says.