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SCI Event

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*Being Mortal* Book Discussion Reflection

Caring for the dying population is a humbling, honorable job. Nurses are fortunate in the ability to witness life and death, the beginning and the end of the spectrum. Caring for the elderly can be a difficult job, and I feel that it is an underappreciated profession. I also think that elderly healthcare facilities do not have the financial means that they need to hire staff with higher educational degrees, such as an RN BSN, and that facilities are often under-staffed. I think the dying process is approached more from a cost-effective approach rather than a life-enhancing way. I have experienced death personally and professionally, having lost my great-grandmother and having lost two of my patients during clinical rotations. I have also spent some time working with hospice nurses during my externship over the summer at the Richmond Veteran's Affairs Medical Center, where they have a unit dedicated to hospice patients.

After reading the novel, I found that my perception of the elderly is very much like the author's perception. He, too, agrees that we do not have enough skilled gerontological nurses. He also agrees that we should try to build a healthcare system that enables people to achieve tasks or have experiences that they merit as valuable at the end of their life. It is vital for them to achieve some of these tasks and goals, because the many of them are not anticipating a cure. When talking about these patients, it is important to understand what cure means and what palliation means. Cure to me means that they are free of disease, and are altogether whole in body, mind, and spirit. Many times patients in the dying phase cannot be cured, and for many of them, a cure is not their goal. Nurses are able to play a pivotal role during this time, as they can help them tie

up loose ends and possibly accomplish last wishes that might be in their current goals. To me, this is where care comes into place. Care is where nurses are able to not only take care of the patient physically, but also take care of them mentally and emotionally as well. Care is an intricate part of nursing and should be done with expertise and a compassionate heart.

Not everyone, nurses included, views death as a delicate or honorable process. In my opinion, society pushes away thoughts of death as much as possible, especially the current generation. America as a whole does not recognize death as other countries do. In America, we have the funeral over the course of two days usually—visitation and the actual funeral—and have some kind of food afterwards. In other countries, it is a longer process, occurring in some places up to a month. We also tend to “shun” our elderly, by putting them into assisted living or long-term care facilities. Other countries, however, view their elderly as wise, useful individuals who have much to teach to younger generations. I do recognize that sometimes families are unable to offer the level of care that their loved one needs, however, I do think that some people are placed in these facilities because family’s do not want to be burdened. I think as a nation, we have to change the way that people look at the elderly generations and the dying process. This will be a gradual process and will require much education to future generations.

Our current healthcare system, in my opinion, does not allow for both medical intervention and a peaceful death, unless the patient has an advanced directive in place. The general mentality, in my opinion, is for providers to do everything possible to sustain life and prolong death, regardless of patient experience. In some situations, this eliminates a peaceful death. Some of the causes could be CPR, mechanical ventilation, beeping alarms, shouting nurses and physicians, bright lights, and sirens. I think that if we educate patients more about palliative care hospice, DNR orders, and advanced directives, than we will ultimately promote

more peaceful deaths. In a perfect world, all patients will have a plan in place and all family members and healthcare providers will be aware of their wishes before the situation arises. We, as a nursing profession, also need to make sure that our patients understand what all of the aforementioned services and documents mean, before they agree with or sign them. We also need to respect individuals as they are dying and encourage family members to do the same. The biggest feat that I see us struggling to overcome is respecting the dying person's final wishes. It can be so hard to let loved ones go, but it is ultimately our duty to respect their last wishes in the most positive way to promote ultimate peace for the individual, which is something that Atul Gawande has encouraged while reading this novel. This was also discussed in detail during our book discussion on November 1, 2016.