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## **Treading carefully**

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Can empathy be taught – and if so, how? That question has taxed nurse educators, particularly since the NMC's renewed emphasis on compassionate care. It was addressed in an unusual way on 5 June, when 500 student nurses attended a performance of *Careful* at the Rose Theatre, Kingston. Created by Dr Alex Mermikides, theatre expert at Guildhall School of Music & Drama, in collaboration with staff and students in the nursing department at Kingston University and St George's, University of London, *Careful* puts its audience in the role of patients. The five nurse characters address the audience directly, alternatively comforting, persuading, informing, encouraging, teasing and, in one case, berating them.

On the cardiac ward, nurse Helena is driven to distraction by Mr Matthews' smoking habit; children's nurse Pip must cannulate a distraught Darren; nurse Dom blames herself for missing vital clues about a diabetic teen; newly qualified nurse Josh is haunted by his first patient; and midwife Archana is utterly exhausted. Each scenario tests the nurse's ability to empathise with their patient. These exchanges are interwoven with dance sequences in which performers enact the unspoken feelings of nurse and patient. Lecturer Sally Richardson commented:

Watching the actors perform as nurses reminds us that caregiving, like acting or dance, is a skill, demanding effort, sensitivity, self-awareness and an understanding of other people's perspectives and positions.

Inspired by the nurses that Alex met when supporting her brother Milton through treatment for acute leukaemia, *Careful* was developed over a two-year period with a group of professional performers who all have personal or professional experience of healthcare (including a former nurse, a former psychiatrist and two movement therapists). Music Lecturer Milton composed the show's soundtrack.

The next phase involved collaboration with Sally Richardson and Terry Firth at Kingston and St George's school of nursing clinical skills and simulation team. Alex delivered a series of workshops for their staff and students that used techniques from the world of theatre to explore how nurses 'perform' care. Activities led by Alex, nurse historian Dr Sue Hawkins and actor Ganiat Kusumu

(‘Nurse Gloria’ in the early days of *Casualty*) covered topics such as emotional labour (Smith 2011), self-care and empathy. Alex also asked students to consider their experiences on placement: ‘If you think of nursing as a “role”, were there moments when you felt you didn’t fulfil that role?’ Students spoke of caring ‘too much’ or ‘just going through the motions, not really feeling it’ or having a role imposed upon them – being treated as servant, as if they were invisible, as a mother, or as though they had all the answers.

Feelings shared by the students made their way into the play (though none of the situations were reproduced literally). For example, students’ unresolved concern about patients they’d grown close to informed the storyline of ‘Nurse Josh’, who spends the play scouring the hospital for his first patient when she is moved to another ward. This adaptation of ‘real-life’ scenarios is similar to simulation-based training or forum theatre, in which realism is less important pedagogically than ‘meaningfulness’ (Nestel et al 2018). The storyline must feel authentic, but not too close for comfort, since this may provoke strong defensive feelings that inhibit learning as the ‘facts’ of the case are denied (Larsen et al 2018). The purpose is to evoke previously unconsidered perspectives in the audience, to inform future practice; a kind of ‘surrogate experience’.

Alex’s workshops are now formally integrated into the nursing practice modules as part of their Adult Nursing degree. A workshop on ‘The Art of Caring’ sensitises students to how bodily stance and tension, scale and pace of movement and gesture, and physical proximity to a patient all convey emotion and affect how others feel – something performers use when conveying characters; nurses practice using this awareness to make patients feel cared for. ‘Drama Out of a Crisis’ (which complements a resuscitation simulation) introduces students to improvisation. A significant part of the nurses’ role involves living with uncertainty. The difficulty of juggling competing clinical priorities in complex situations for individual patients, relatives and staff – who may not always respond to our interventions in expected ways – means nurses must develop both the resilience and the capacity to tolerate and cope with unpredictable situations. Improvisation helps students deal with uncertainty by paying attention to what others might be thinking and feeling, and becoming alert to their own emotions.

The performance in the Rose was opened by Paul Newcombe and followed with an audience discussion chaired by Professor Karen Norman: ‘How did the show make you feel?’ she asked; ‘Which stories resonated with you, and why?’ One student mentioned a comic scene in which Nurse Helena is run ragged by Mr Matthews’ call bell: ‘That’s about power’, she says, drawing attention to the seesawing power dynamic between nurse and patient. ‘You really taught me something,’ said another to the actor playing Nurse Dom, ‘the bit when you realised that the patient was overdosing insulin on purpose – we’re all scared we might miss something like that’.

So, can empathy be taught? Given that theatre depends on its audience’s capacity to empathise, can nurses learn empathy for patients by watching a show? The makers of *Careful* do not claim to ‘teach’, but rather to offer a new perspective on the experience of the nurse. If

anything, it invites empathy for the nurse. As Milton said in the post-show discussion, 'The piece is a love letter to nurses'.

## References

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