“To care about care”

10 August 2011

In what has been a whirlwind of a summer, I recently took a unique tour – visits to three different emergency rooms in less than a week! The journey also took me through other sites on the healthcare map, including intensive care, progressive care, elder care, and rehabilitative care. It’s not hard to see why this area of the economy generates such intense interest.

Financial concerns aside, the common denominator along the way to health seems to be “care.” Yet, sadly, this part of the equation seems to get short shrift.

How caring is it for hospital employee to walk into a room, do what has to be done in terms of gauging numbers or aligning monitors, and not even say “hello” to the patient, let alone call that person by name? How caring is it to leave wrappers, gauze, or even empty crystalloid bags on nearby counters or the floor around a patient’s bed? How caring is it not to help someone brush what few teeth she has left?

Granted, treating a cranial hemorrhage or a pneumothorax deserves significantly more medical attention than does talk or trash or toothpaste. And biomedical technology has brought such
amazing advances to the treatment of illnesses that we ought to be grateful for the level of care available to us in this area.

But when hospital staff focus only on the problem a patient has, and not on the patient who has the problem, “health” is reduced to physiology and “care” falls by the bedside. In an era when care is increasingly “managed” by check lists, insurance limits, and governmental regulations, the risk of losing sight of the person becomes even more adverse.

In the end, sickness and suffering is the lot to which all of us will succumb. It’s what mortality entails. ST. FRANCIS DE SALES, for whom sickness both physical and psychological played such a formative role in life, once wrote that this condition “is nothing else than the school of humility where we learn about our misery and weakness, and how vain, delicate, and weak we are” (Letters of Spiritual Direction, p. 118). Yet, he reminds us, we ought not be disturbed on that account, for it is an opportunity to benefit from the mercy of others (in charity) and God (ultimately).

Still, when it is you or a loved one lying on that hospital bed, the simple acts of kindness shown by professionals who do their ordinary tasks with a large dose of personal interaction go a long way to putting “care” in its proper place.