

A Reunion with Alfie

In my speciality of cancer nursing my relationships with my patients and their families can be short and intense as I guide them along their inevitable path. The road is often paved with sadness, but I still find it deeply rewarding.

Let me tell you about just one of the many positive experiences I had at work recently.

A few years ago “we” cared for an Indonesian man with a type of lymphoma. He had a complicated surgery and then required 6 months of intensive chemotherapy. “Alfie” was a resident on our ward for quite some time, so we got to know him and his family quite well. He was always so polite, cheery and we loved his elfish toothy grin. During one of my encounters with Alfie I mentioned my love of Indonesian food. Alfie immediately turned to his wife and spoke to her in their native language, and she promptly left the ward. She returned a couple of hours later with enough homemade Beef Rendang to feed all the nurses.

After many months of treatment Alfie was finally given the all clear and he simply disappeared from our lives. Other patients came and went, as did the nursing staff.

I had long since forgotten about Alfie until recently during an evening shift. I was confronted in the corridor by a man who simply said, “I want to hug you”!

I immediately recognised the Asian man as a much fatter, darker, healthier version of the Alfie I had known from 7 years ago.

His warm infectious smile spread to my face as he threw his arms around me and gave me what was possibly the warmest, most rewarding embrace I had ever had.

Physically, Alfie is not a big man, but this was a big hug. Alfie whispered in my ear "thank you for saving my life".

During our embrace I looked over Alfie's shoulder and saw his wife standing not far away. She had a tear in her eye as she silently mouthed the words "thank you".

The sentiment of what had transpired in the corridor that evening was somewhat lost on my newer colleagues, but it left me with a lasting warm glow.

Later I explained to my colleagues that so often our professional relationships end in sadness, and that if they stay in Cancer Services for long enough I hope they will know what it meant to me to see Alfie and his family "living" life.