

Nurses in the park: a personal account of the Christchurch earthquake



BY MARY CHIARELLA

I once wrote that nursing at its best is eminently forgettable, because what we do is to make the intolerable tolerable, the unbearable bearable and (after Taylor 1994) the extraordinary ordinary (Chiarella 2002). Lest the ability of nurses to do this be forgotten again, please indulge me with a personal account of my experiences with a group of urology nurses following the Christchurch earthquake. I don't know the names of all of them, so I am not going to name any of them. They know who they are and they know what they did, and I am forever in their debt. So I will tell my story so you will know theirs.

I will begin with an account of the earthquake and intersperse my experience with my observations about the nurses. I was working in my room on the 10th floor of the conference hotel when there was a terrible bang and I was ejected from my desk chair onto my knees on the floor. We had been warned there could be aftershocks and I thought 'Wow that was some aftershock'. Then there was this dreadful groaning, rumbling noise that seemed to (and obviously did) come from the bowels of the earth and then the building started to shake. I got down flat on the floor but there was breaking glass and furniture falling on me and my biggest concern was the huge bed that was literally dancing around in front of me. I thought that if it landed on my head I could get knocked unconscious and then I wouldn't get out so I held that away with my arms. By this stage I knew it was an earthquake and all I could think was 'I must survive – the boys can't be orphans'.

So it stopped. I don't know how long it went for but it seemed like ages – it was probably only seconds. As I stood up my handbag was right in front of me – it had been at the other side of the room – so I picked it up, identified the broken glass and put on the first pair of shoes I could spot (heels!), looked briefly for my phone and room key on the floor but decided I couldn't delay getting out. The contents of the mini-bar and my ironing board were blocking my way out but once they were

traversed miraculously I opened my door and walked straight into the stairwell of the fire escape where a man in shorts and a T-shirt encouraged me to come down as quickly as possible. He was anxious the fire escape could collapse and I later learnt several fire escapes did. We could see the dust through the windows of the fire escape. I thought of 9/11.

When we got out there was a gas leak, water coming up through the massive fissures in the road and the tarmac turning to mud in the process I now know to be liquefaction. The man told me to get onto the grass – the heels weren't good on the soggy tarmac. I thanked him and he left me. Several nurses recognised me from the keynote address I had given the day before and greeted me with warmth; delighted that I was safe. I didn't know anyone at the conference so it felt good that people knew who I was. One nurse immediately loaned me her phone to text the boys to tell them I was alive – the reception was sporadic but the message got through to one son who was able to let the other know, so at least they knew I was safe. There was then another massive aftershock. Everyone screamed and fell to their knees and it was then we decided we had to get out of the city centre to Hadley Park. We set off walking but were re-routed as the way we had chosen turned out to take us over a bridge. This meant we went down a street where everything was reduced to rubble. It looked like a film set and certainly didn't seem real. When one man went to take photos another man grabbed him by the collar and said 'don't take photos mate – these are graves' and then I knew it was real. It was very sobering. The nurses from the conference, who didn't know me beforehand, said 'you stick with us Mary'. I was extraordinarily grateful. Even by this stage there were nurses checking up on people – 'have you hurt yourself?' 'Aren't you a diabetic?' I was in a thin suit as I had been in my room and one nurse immediately gave me her pashmina to wear. I was pleased to be able to return it to her later when I had managed to secure a size 10 hoodie. Those of you who know me can only imagine the contortions required to squeeze my ample bosoms into this top but in they went and I was warmer and able to return the beautiful shawl. A couple of nurses had been

able to get their suitcases out. Once they got to the park and saw the plight of others, they opened them up and doled out their clothes. One commented to me later it was fascinating to see their outfits changing hands across the community in the park according to need and to spot fleetingly a familiar top worn by several different people.

Once in the park we felt safer and, after a short move up the road to another part of the park, soon wooden pallets arrived en masse for us to sit on in case there was another quake and to keep us off the grass – there were massive cracks in the ground in the park with mud seeping out of them, huge trees down too. Roads were dreadfully damaged and one pavement across from the park had two sections that met in a huge inverted V!

At this stage everyone moved into action. We were all cold and locals started turning up with pushchairs containing blanket and clothes. People were respectful, no one grabbed and the most needy were assisted first. I suggested I might be like Bear Grylls as I scavenged for plastic to wrap people in, but with typical nursing humour one of my newfound pals pointed out that with the pearls, the high heels and the scrappy bits of plastic, I probably looked more like a bag lady! Some people were in shock and nurses were comforting them, wrapping them in the plastic and any blankets we could find and lying down and cuddling them, just to keep them warm. Of course we all developed the art of al fresco toileting and it was on one such trip I made my big find – a massive white tarpaulin that we got 12 or more nurses under. It kept us warm and gave us a sense of community. People who were cold were invited under it and one guy who was astutely spotted by one of our number – he was just in his shirtsleeves and very blue - climbed under and immediately fell asleep. He later told me he had become so cold he had stopped feeling it and our invitation to him probably enabled him to go on. One nurse had four lipsticks so we all applied 'lippy' in case we got snapped by the media. Apparently I did and I have had people stop me in the street since my return to tell me they saw me in Christchurch. Thank God for the lippy! The nurses all made light of their situation, kept the humour coming and the good nature was evident.

THERE WAS THEN ANOTHER MASSIVE AFTERSHOCK. EVERYONE SCREAMED AND FELL TO THEIR KNEES AND IT WAS THEN WE DECIDED WE HAD TO GET OUT OF THE CITY CENTRE TO HADLEY PARK.

NZ Air Force – everyone cheered as the plane took off.

We arrived in Wellington and were taken to the Civil Defence Welfare centre, clasping our Red Cross papers tightly, and there we were able to connect with the Australian High Commission, who advised us that we would return to Sydney as ‘undocumented uplifts’ – I thought it sounded like some sort of clandestine bra! They found us somewhere to stay and we organised our own flights home from there. I got back from NZ on the Friday morning after the earthquake having left all my possessions in that 10th floor room. But I am alive and truly I count my blessings. I am aware that only a couple of weeks ago I was in Hadley Park not knowing what would happen to me with the

In an attempt to make ourselves useful, we presented at the first aid tent to see if we could assist. The first aiders asked us to take on the ‘matron’s rounds’ (as one of the nurses dubbed them) and so we went around the evacuees asking who needed medications that night and the following day and getting them to go to the first aid centre and order them. What was amazing was that by 10pm people were actually receiving their medications – digoxin, insulin etc. The Red Cross and Civil Defence operations ran like clockwork. I shall never forget the generosity, competence and kindness of the people of Christchurch to us evacuees. I am so very sorry that Christchurch is experiencing such grief, but everyone must be so proud of their spirit, humanity and resilience.

It started to rain hard at about 8pm and they moved us into a tent that was being prepared for the flower show in the park. It was a relief to be dry and then began the documentation by the Red Cross. Once again, due to the rain the crowds inside the tent were huge and the poor volunteers were becoming overwhelmed. A couple of the nurses we were with just got behind the Red Cross counter and started helping with the processing. Their colleagues in our group made up their beds, organised their food and drinks so that when they joined us they were cared for. Once you had your papers you could get blankets, bed

rolls, pillows, food etc – it was so organised. Most of the food was not gluten free but everyone was given a banana and all the nurses were hoarding their bananas for me – they were on a mission to find gluten free food! They were so good to me, as the people of Christchurch were to all of us. People were coming to the tent offering beds for the night. One guy came and said ‘our electricity and phone has just come on – we have no sewerage or water but you are welcome to a bed’. We sent some of the elderly with him. I was about to give him my card with my home number on it and said ‘would you be so kind as to ring my boys and tell them you have seen me alive and I am fine’. He whipped his mobile phone out of his pocket and said ‘why don’t you ring them now’. So I was able to speak to my son that night at home, which was wonderful.

At midnight the Civil Defence moved us out to a high school on the outskirts of town with carpets to sleep on in the classrooms and electricity. They woke us at 5am to tell us the NZ Air Force was evacuating to Wellington and had two flights organised already if anyone wanted to go. I thought we were better out of Christchurch because we were just another thing for the local authorities to worry about. Plus the aftershocks had been going on all night and that was very scary. So we went on a bus to the airport and were evacuated by the

earth continuing to shake, as it did while the retrieval teams continued the thankless task of searching for bodies and the people of Christchurch start to bury their dead.

The nurses who befriended me were good-natured, competent and calm. They maintained high spirits in a time of significant stress and quietly made themselves useful where appropriate. They were quick to spot someone in distress and quick to respond. I have previously used the term ‘collegial generosity’ to describe the ethos when teams work well (Chiarella 2007). The raggle taggle team of nurses that we became on that day had collegial generosity in spades.

REFERENCES

- Chiarella, E. M. 2002. *The Legal and Professional Status of Nursing*. Churchill Livingstone: Edinburgh.
- Chiarella, M. 2007. Redesigning models of patient care delivery and organisation: building collegial generosity in response to workplace challenges. *Australian Health Review* 31(Supp 1):109-116.
- Taylor, B. 1994. *Being Human: Ordinariness in Nursing*. Churchill Livingstone: Melbourne.