

Bliss

in unlikely places

Norma Kirwan shares her experience of the peace Reiki can bring to the terminally ill

Right:
Norma
Kirwan

I started to volunteer as an assistant in the in-patient unit of a hospice in Welwyn Garden City more than five years ago. At this time, Reiki was not sought and may even have been regarded with suspicion. However, keeping in mind one of the abiding teachings of my beloved Reiki master, Wanja Twan, that Reiki flows through everything that we do and all that we are, whether serving a cup of tea or doing the washing up, or, in quieter moments, just sitting with a patient, when we set the intention for Reiki to support and help, that is exactly what happens.

About a year ago, when an opening came in this same hospice to offer Reiki treatments to the patients as a volunteer complementary therapist, the transition felt like a natural step. There were some administrative aspects to get my head around, but the main challenges of working in a hospice setting were already familiar to me. I was already used to being with very ill patients, adjusting treatment times, and working within the limits of what is possible for the patient on a particular day and in cooperation with the medical team and their needs.

The treatment takes place in the ward, rather than on a treatment couch in a relaxing therapy room, with the patient seated on a chair, or more usually, in bed. Appointments are not set up in advance, since the needs of patients change at short notice in the hospice. I start by liaising with the nursing staff and then introducing myself to patients and explaining that I am a complementary therapist offering Reiki treatments. It surprises me that so many people are still unfamiliar with Reiki. I explain



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what Reiki is and what a treatment consists of. I demonstrate some hand positions and suggest that the best way is to experience a short treatment, emphasising that if at any moment, it does not feel right or comfortable, we will stop the treatment.

Often, about five minutes into the treatment, the person asks: “Are you wearing heated pads on your hands?” and I explain that my own hands are often quite cold (“cold hands, warm heart!”) and that what they are feeling is the Reiki energy flowing through. “That was so relaxing”, is a typical comment, frequently followed by, “I’d like some of this every day!” or “Can I take you home with me?”

Relatives may be present, sitting quietly nearby. Sometimes, having a close relative present during the treatment enhances the experience. Recently, in the case of a very ill patient who could no longer communicate her needs, except by gentle pressure of her fingers, her loving partner played a piece of her favourite tranquil music as we worked and then, looking through some photos on his iPad, quietly recalled for her some happy outings and places they had visited together. The atmosphere in the room, which was filled with beautiful flowers from the patient’s own garden, was full of joy and peace, approaching bliss, if you can believe me, a very special experience shared by the three of us. No need to wonder about the principle of exchange in that moment. I felt more than rewarded in ways that money cannot touch.

Despite the many constraints of working in a palliative care setting, once we set the intention for Reiki to flow, put our notice on the door (Patient Enjoying Complementary Therapy, Please do not Disturb) and place the hands in the first position, peace descends. It is as though a sacred space opens around the patient and the Reiki practitioner, stillness, a gentle silence, which can accommodate the nurses coming in to quietly check on medications, or the presence of close family. In fact, it has been my experience that the whole environment calms and settles while a Reiki treatment is in progress, with other patients in the room and visiting relatives sharing in the benefits.

There have been times, when the terminally ill patient is right on that border between two worlds, when other complementary therapies, which may involve manipulation or massage, would be unthinkably intrusive; when even

the loving touch of close and beloved family members is too much to bear and yet the patient not only accepts but asks for Reiki, indicating their request by the pressure of a hand or the slightest nod of the head, and guiding the Reiki practitioner’s hand to where they need it to be. There can be no greater demonstration of the gentle, subtle, powerful and loving energy that Reiki is. At such times, I experience an overwhelming sense of privilege to be the means of offering the gift of peace and unconditional love that is Reiki.

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I also work one morning per week as a volunteer complementary therapist offering Reiki at the Cherry Lodge Cancer Care Centre in Barnet. This is an independent charity based in Barnet, covering much of North London and South Hertfordshire, and working in partnership with hospital and community healthcare services providing orthodox treatments. Here the experience of offering Reiki is very different from the hospice situation though no less rewarding. We have a beautiful, relaxing therapeutic space to work in, privacy and time for full treatments. Members of the centre are at various stages of their cancer journey, some dealing with terminal diagnoses, others in recovery from the harsh regimes of the range of cancer treatments. In all cases, Reiki treatment helps not only with pain management, nausea, stress and anxiety, but most of all, it restores the sense of being a valued, unique and precious human being.

Essential and lifesaving as the medical interventions have been, the individual patient inevitably emerges depleted, confused, overwhelmed and often depressed, feeling that they have been part of an inexorable and, to some extent, dehumanising process. In the gentle, loving space of a Reiki treatment, there is the possibility of the restoration of harmony and balance, a reintegration of all the elements that go to make up a human being, spiritual, physical, mental, psychological and emotional. □