

May 2025 Chaplaincy Update

Greetings from LA General Hospital! As the month draws to a close, I am contemplating how busy we have been. We had several staff chaplains out for vacation, and our chaplain interns also finished their unit at the beginning of May. So, we have been running around trying to cover the different units and needs all throughout the hospital. My visits have continued to go well, and it's been interesting to observe the fluctuations of patients in the emergency department, which, in comparison to last year, has had fewer patients, especially in the critical area commonly known as "resuscitation." A key event we had this month was the annual memorial for the staff who passed away last year. Since I have been working at the hospital since January 2024, I was able to recognize one of them who was an environmental worker and passed on suddenly. She would sometimes stop by our office to say hello and share what's going on, including her health issues. One of my memorable moments during the memorial was the emergency room staff who recognized a nurse, Sandra Shells, who passed away in 2022 after being assaulted while waiting to take a metro bus to work. Sandy,¹ as the staff fondly called her, had worked at the hospital as a nurse for 38 years. A nursing scholarship was set up in her honor to help student nurses who are training, and the two students who received scholarships were awarded during the memorial service. I was also privileged to participate in leading the ceremony again this year and to read a poem by Emily Dickinson—*Because I could not stop for death*. Below I will share a few of my encounters with patients and their families. Most of these encounters occurred while I was covering palliative care and involved referrals I received during the daily rounds.



Photos from the Staff Memorial on May 20th

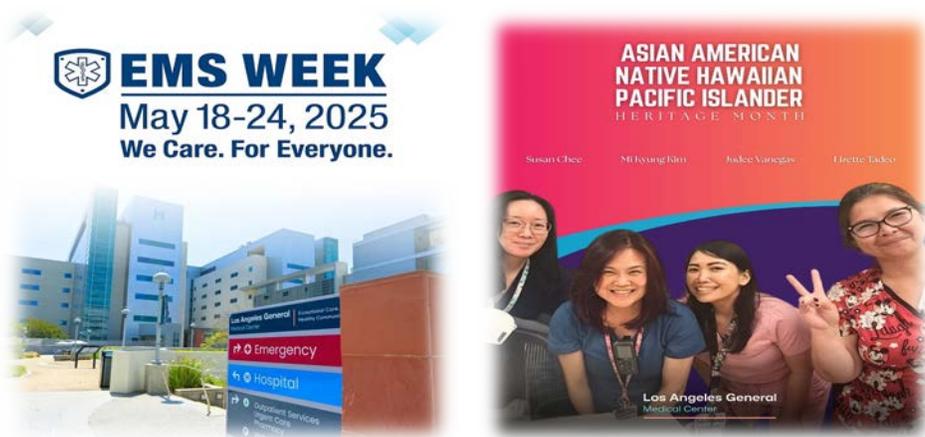
"Unknown Downtime"

One of most challenging visits I had this month was with a young man in his twenties who was on comfort-care. I learned about his condition while attending the palliative care rounds. The young man was incarcerated and had

¹ Link to Sandra Shells (Sandy) Memorial Page on LA General Hospital's Website which includes a video.

Rev Charity Ngaruiya, PhD, BCC
cngaruiya@dhs.lacounty.gov

attempted to take his own life and was found after unknown downtime. After his family who live on the East Coast was notified, they had opted for organ donation but because he didn't pass on during the required time (90 minutes), they couldn't harvest his organs and so he was transferred to a medical surgical floor and was now on comfort care. When I visited, he was busy with a team of nurses who were cleaning him up and I noticed that there was no family at the bedside. While waiting for the staff to finish, I assessed the patient's chart and learnt that his family included a sister and aunt, he had lost his mom when he was sixteen and no one knew where his dad was. The sister had said the last time they spoke was a year ago and the patient was living somewhere in another state. She had also mentioned that they were not close but would try and visit. I visited again later and noted that the patient though alone, seemed comfortable and I was amazed by the nursing student staff who were taking good care of him and so he had some company at the bedside. I offered a prayer and compassionate presence at the bedside and spent time talking to him as he was alone. I was still thinking about the young man when I went back to work the next day and had planned to reach out to the family for grief support but sadly, I learnt that he had passed on and no family member had visited.



Celebrating EMS week & AANHPI Month @ LA General

"I Want My Momma"

Another encounter I had this month, was a referral from palliative care which I was covering as the chaplain was out on leave. They had asked me to visit and offer support to the patient and his family. When I arrived, Landon (pseudonym) was lying on the bed and awake and engaged in a conversation with his brother. I observed that he seemed uncomfortable and was laying on one side of the bed.

After introducing myself as a chaplain, I went ahead to offer extended listening support as Landon and his brother shared about his prolonged illness. They had come to the hospital due to multiple wounds on Landon's lower back, which had developed over

Rev Charity Ngaruiya, PhD, BCC
cngaruiya@dhs.lacounty.gov

time and were not healing. Landon shared that he was in excruciating pain that was constant and uncontrolled, and he was also feeling sad, in shock and overwhelmed as they had just received news that he had cancer. As the staff came into attend to Landon, I continued to offer support to his brother, who noted that he was a few years younger. He went ahead to share that Landon had been sick for over thirty years after being shot on the back by unknown people while they were living in another state and had never been able to walk again. For several years, he had been doing well and was using a wheelchair to get around but in the last few years, he had been declining and was now bed bound and had developed the wounds. The brother also noted that despite having nurses take care of him, the wounds were not healing, and they were in shock and trying to process the news that he now had cancer.



A Jewish Siddur- (Prayer Book) that I got for a patient on my unit-7C

I was still present when a lady who said she was “like a sister” to Landon called and was on FaceTime. After hearing that I was a chaplain, she went ahead to share her thoughts noting that as a family, they were not ready to give up on Landon, they still had hope, and she was planning to help them look for options of cancer treatment. She then turned to speak with Landon and told him, that “everything depended on you, Landon” and he needed “to keep holding on.” The brother also shared that because he is busy with work in the entertainment industry, the mom is the main person who takes care of his brother, but they are very close as a family. He also shared stories of how they had moved back home out of state and then one by one, they all came back to California, which they now consider home. I continued to offer support as Landon later shared that his main issue was the constant pain he had to deal with and requested me to talk to the staff about it, which I did and spoke with the palliative care team since they had been consulted for pain issues and a discussion on goals of care. As I explored spiritual care needs, Landon said they are Catholics and requested for a priest to visit. They also requested me to continue visiting for support, which I agreed to do as my schedule allowed.

My second visit with Landon and his family was during a family meeting with medical and palliative care teams to explore goals of care. Since I arrived early, I was able to meet the mom, and the brother was also present at the bedside. She spent time talking about Landon's decline over the past few years and her concerns that he was suffering and her shock over the cancer diagnosis. The mom also shared the same concerns with the medical teams when they arrived, and they did a treatment review of Landon's condition since he came in. One of the major challenges they discussed was the issue of pain which was related to his refusal of many procedures since he was constantly in pain due to the wounds. The medical treatment presented the options available including the possibility that because the cancer had spread, there may not be any options to treat it. This made the family sad and tearful as that day Landon was hardly speaking and was in and out of drowsiness. His mom shared that she knew something was wrong with him when they had to come back to the hospital and noted that he had been in and out of hospital several times in the last two years. The family was also concerned about the patient's suffering which had been going on for too long since he was shot and opted to enroll him on hospice. She described how over the years, Landon would buy new clothes and just display them in his apartment though he hardly ever wore them because he had nowhere to go.

My last visit with Landon was on a Thursday before he was discharged home with hospice. I received a referral from the palliative care team in the morning to stop by and see him. When I got to the room, Landon was awake and alone. I noticed he was more alert than a few days before when we had the family meeting. He was also in pain and several times tried to reposition himself so that he could try and find a comfortable position. As I offered support, Landon turned to look at me and said "I don't want not to die".... then he paused and became tearful and said, "I want my momma," and I told him that during my previous visit, his mom said she comes to visit at around 12pm every day and so it was still early in the morning. Landon stayed quiet for a while and as I explored his concerns about dying, he went ahead to share that the doctors had told him he had "a few days to weeks to live" and was feeling scared about it. I continued to offer support and observed that Landon was in a lot of pain and discomfort and so I informed him that I would let his bedside nurse know and allow him to rest. After leaving the room, I spoke with the nurse who confirmed that they were trying to manage his pain and it was a challenge though with palliative care on board, they were able to minimize it to a certain degree.

"Helping others"

Another visit I had while covering palliative care was with a middle-aged woman who was dealing with rare form of cancer that is genetic. When I arrived, Erica (pseudonym) was awake and lying on the bed and observed that she seemed tired. There was no family present, but Erica's mom joined us later. After introducing myself as a chaplain, I offered extended support to Erica as shared about dealing with cancer for several years. She was coping well and continued to be hopeful for recovery though it was a difficult journey. Erica shared how she had worked as a nursing

Rev Charity Ngaruiya, PhD, BCC
cngaruiya@dhs.lacounty.gov

assistant because she wanted to help people, but she had to stop when she started getting sick often and her body couldn't handle the work hours or the workload. Erica also talked about her ongoing chemo treatment and the hopes that it would work so that she can have more time. She was concerned about the constant fatigue and needing to rest or sleep most of the time while at home.

As I explored coping mechanisms, Erica shared that overtime, she had to cope through different activities such as watching movies, going for shopping or visiting the park, which she is grateful that she can still do them on her own. She also recently went back to school to finish her undergraduate studies since she took a break in 2019, to focus on the treatment for cancer. Erica was also hoping to continue her nursing studies when she completed the chemotherapy treatment and regained strength. While assessing her sources of support, Erica shared that her mom was her main support person, and she also noted that she has a sixteen-year-old son who she worried about and wanted to see him grow up. Erica was grateful that her son was doing well and has good support from friends. I helped her think through ways to find extra support for her son such as the school counselors in case he ever needs help. Erica also revealed that she was dealing with mental health issues and was also receiving treatment including meeting regularly with a therapist.

As the visit ended, I decided to explore if Erica had any spiritual care needs and she confirmed that she was a Catholic and I shared with her and her mom about the ongoing availability of chaplains for support and the various services we offer. I also let them know that they could have their own priest visit for additional support if they prefer that and they appreciated the visit and support.

Prayer Items:

- Continue to pray for our patients and their families as they receive treatment, especially for those like Landon and Erica who are dealing with terminal illnesses. Pray for patients incarcerated and separated from their families. Pray for the homeless, immigrants, and the uninsured, who make up half of my ER patients.
- Continue to pray for the staff who serve the patients and their families. Pray for those who were on strike last month as their union negotiates better terms for them and works with the LA County health administration. Pray for the families of staff who have passed on, like Sandra Shells, and their colleagues at the hospital.
- Continue to pray for me as I serve patients and have many encounters during the week so I can do so wisely. Pray as I finish my research paper and presentation for a bioethics annual conference at the end of June in Chicago.



May the God of Hope fill you with all Joy and Peace as you trust in Him~ Romans 15:13