



## COMPASSIONATE MEDICAL TEAM GETS CREATIVE TO UNITE COUPLE ONE LAST TIME

Whenever couples or family members are hospitalized in the COVID unit at Nash UNC Health Care at the same time, the care team tries to help them visit each other if their medical situations allow.

“It gives them something to look forward to, a kind and familiar face, and also gets them up and moving, which helps with oxygenation,” explained Julie Szczyzkowski, a hospitalist at Nash UNC who frequently works in the COVID unit. “I learned that one of the biggest challenges we are up against is the patient’s psyche while they are hospitalized. The patients often experience fear, separation from their loved ones, and loneliness,” Szczyzkowski added.

An elderly couple receiving treatment for COVID at Nash UNC earlier this year were initially admitted to separate areas of the hospital due to their differing medical situations at the time. Since the married couple were

not initially admitted to the same unit, it made facilitating visits with each other extremely difficult. This moved Szczyzkowski, who was the husband’s hospitalist, to work with both patients’ care teams to have the wife moved to the husband’s unit when her condition allowed, so they could visit each other more easily.

After some time, the husband’s status began to decline and it made visiting his wife, even on the same hallway, impossible. The care team then moved to connect the couple through phone conversations, but even that was proving to be too difficult. After hearing this news, Szczyzkowski knew exactly what she wanted to do to help the entire family, including the couple’s daughters who were having to visit their parents separately.

“My plan was to place the husband and wife in the same room that Friday so they could visit as a family, and the nurses and charge nurse were ready to make it happen,” Szczyzkowski

“Being a part of this made me think of how I would feel if my own parents were in this situation. It was very emotional, but an honor to take care of the patients and be there to support their daughters.”

Ashley Pittman  
Registered Nurse, Nash UNC Health Care

recalled. “Unfortunately, both patients had a significant decline that Friday morning. I spoke with the husband and he was tired. He did not want any further medical interventions, so he made himself comfort measures only. He verbalized he wanted to see his wife and daughters. Meanwhile, his wife was also declining, but non-verbal, therefore the husband and family would have to make end of life decisions for her. I spoke with the nurses, the wife’s provider, Dr. Patil, and the couple’s daughters and we decided it was time to just get them together,” she added.

After the decision was made to put the couple in the same room, the care team worked together to make it happen.

“The nurses on the unit were awesome. They figured out staffing and the logistics of how they would place two patients in one room and continue to be safe. We were able to have their beds next to each other so the husband could hold his wife’s hand,” Szczyzkowski explained.

Ashley Pittman, a COVID unit nurse, took the couple on as her

patients. “Having both in the same room allowed the patients and their family to have a certain type of continuity in their care,” Pittman explained. “Being a part of this made me think of how I would feel if my own parents were in this situation. It was very emotional, but an honor to take care of the patients and be there to support their daughters,” she added.

After Szczyzkowski, Dr. Patil, and the couple’s care team consulted with the husband and his daughters, the wife was also put on comfort measures. Within 24 hours of each other, they had both passed. Their daughters were able to be there for both the husband and wife’s passing, due to the unique arrangements made by Szczyzkowski, Pittman, and other members of the couple’s care team. “The daughters were very appreciative for the opportunity to be with them both. While it was difficult, it allowed them to make the most of the time they had left together,” Szczyzkowski recalled. “I think it brought about a sort of peace for the whole family,” Pittman added.

