

Drug and Alcohol Nursing. Is that a Thing? Colleen Blums

'Hi. I bought a hospital. Could you manage the Drug and Alcohol Unit? It was the voice of my friend and colleague.

'What? No! I'm about to go sailing, for a long time.

"How about until you go?

I was in my new workplace the next Monday. My new work colleagues' greetings were at best cool as they evaluated the interloper replacing their much loved, long-time manager.

My friend and colleague, and now my boss, blocked the doorway as if sensing that every fibre of my being was screaming *'Leave! Get out now!*

We are experienced drug and alcohol nurses. We just make it look easy was the stern, pinch-lipped rebuke to my ignorant comment about the skill required to safely manage alcohol withdrawal. Then, within a matter of days, I was confronted with three different patients whose withdrawal was anything but easy; one with a seizure, another with a respiratory arrest and another with bleeding varices. Lesson learned! I took to the books and started to come to grips with the underlying physiology of tolerance, dependence and withdrawal and the relevant nursing care. It made for compelling reading. Who would have thought?

'This breathalyser needs re-calibrating. The BAL isn't coming down I commented to no-one in particular.

'It's not the breathalyzer, it's the patient's liver that's the problem. Back to the books to understand more about the metabolism of alcohol and to be shocked to learn that withdrawal can start well before the BAL has reached zero; even at levels high enough to render a naïve drinker senseless. I was lovin' this physiology.

In order of rank, the heart, lungs and kidneys were my favourite organs, but after working in the D&A field for only a brief time I developed a grudging respect for the hard working and very forgiving liver, hitherto considered rather boring. I was completely dazzled by the brain, especially the dopamine / reward system and the whole concept of neuroplasticity. The brain has displaced the heart as my number-one-all-time- favourite organ (and in truth the liver has quietly crept into third place)!

'You saved my life

'I wouldn't have a family without you

'I would be dead by now

'I couldn't have done it without you

Comments from grateful patients, said with a tear in their eye (and often in mine). True stories from people who manage to piece their shattered lives back together and those who keep trying. This I discovered was the real reward. Drug and alcohol nurses are an intimate part of this recovery; sometimes educating, sometimes encouraging and at times managing life threatening emergencies. The requisite skills are wide ranging and include a good understanding of medical nursing plus a deep knowledge and understanding of the human mind and spirit.

So, what happened to change a job of convenience into a career choice that has lasted fourteen years? The patients who have the strength to pick themselves up when they falter, the technical knowledge and repertoire of nursing skills required to safely care and treat them and the nursing colleagues.

So yes, Drug and Alcohol nursing is a thing.