

A Day in the Life of an Emergency Department Nurse

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Peggy Polaski, R.N.

As an ambulance screeches to a halt in front of the emergency department (ED), physicians and nurses rush outside, knowing that they have only minutes to save a patient's life. While this does happen on occasion, the majority of cases at the Elmhurst Memorial Hospital ED are not quite as dramatic. However, the threat of that experience is always top of mind for Peggy Polaski and fellow ED nurses who thrive in a fast-paced environment that encompasses all aspects of nursing.

Following is an account of one of Polaski's recent 12-hour shifts.

When Polaski arrives at the ED in the middle of the afternoon, there is no telling what she will encounter. The one thing that she can count on is that her evening shift will be unpredictable.

"There's so much that goes on here ... it's like organized chaos," Polaski says. "There is constant change and excitement, and all you can do is adapt and deal with it."

3:00 pm Polaski reviews patient conditions with the outgoing shift.

Once on the clock, Polaski receives an update from a nurse on the outgoing shift and reviews patient conditions. Seconds later, she is informed that an ambulance is bringing in a patient with chest pain. Polaski meets the EMTs at the door and ushers the patient into a vacant room. After consulting with a physician, Polaski accompanies the patient to the cardiac catheterization lab for further testing.

"Every aspect of nursing is present in the ED," she says. "We have to determine who is in the greatest need. Because physicians can't get to everybody right away, they rely on us to screen patients appropriately."

4:15 pm Polaski treats a variety of illnesses in a matter of minutes.

Upon returning from the lab, Polaski starts an IV for a dehydrated young girl. As she finishes, the X-rays and lab reports for an elderly woman with pneumonia arrive. Polaski shows the results to a physician and makes arrangements to admit the woman to the Hospital.

After checking on more patients and reviewing discharge instructions with them, Polaski sees an opportunity for dinner. She hustles to the nurses' lounge to call home while she eats.

9:50 pm Polaski balances the needs of several patients at once.

A man with a broken wrist and a patient with abdominal pain become Polaski's focus now. Technicians assist with the broken wrist so Polaski can consult with a physician about the abdominal pain, which turns out to be kidney stones. In between, Polaski is sure to monitor her other patients.

"I am constantly back and forth between every room," she says. "It doesn't matter *why* patients are here; it's a crisis to them and to their families. Even though it may be something that's minor to us, it's not minor to them. We have to be sensitive to that."

2:25 am Polaski thrives on the unpredictability of the ED.

Patients continue to trickle in throughout the night but at a much slower pace than before. Nothing out of the ordinary occurs, which allows Polaski to focus her attention on her patients without interruption.

"You just never know what the day or night is going to be like," Polaski says. "But there's nothing better than the satisfaction of seeing a quick turnaround. "It's a good feeling when you see someone who is sick and know that you can fix them right away."



When a patient arrives via ambulance, Polaski meets the EMTs and ushers the patient into a vacant room.



With no time to waste, Polaski begins determining her course of treatment.



Before treating a new patient, Polaski first familiarizes herself with the patient's chart.



Polaski works closely with other nurses, lending a hand when she can and asking for help when she needs it.



After reviewing discharge instructions, Polaski escorts her patient to his family.



Polaski is in constant communication with physicians because they rely on her to screen patients appropriately.



Polaski also must keep her patients' families informed of what is happening. In this case, the news is good.



When a situation arises, there is not always time to assign responsibility, so Polaski and other nurses work together to find a solution.



In a rare quiet moment, Polaski seizes the opportunity to take a break.