



## Oncology at Center Stage

Clare Geiser

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## Oncology at Center Stage

by Clare Geiser, R.N., B.S.N., O.C.N.

**“Wit”** is defined as a mode of expression intended to arouse amusement. “Wit” is also the title of the Pulitzer Prize-winning play now appearing off-Broadway in New York City. The play’s heroine, Dr. Vivian Bearing, a Ph.D. in English literature, has devoted her life to the “wit” of 17th century poetry, particularly the work of John Donne.

Vivian has just been diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer. Yet the way she is treated by her supposed caregivers inspired anything but wit in this oncology professional.

The setting is the generic University Cancer Center. Over the course of her illness, Vivian is shown to be ignored, offered no compassion, in extreme pain before anyone addresses it, vomiting without relief, provided no support from any other disciplines such as social work or nutrition, and left to suffer on her own.

I found it interesting to note that after nearly twenty-five years as an oncology professional, I did not recognize any of the medical personnel depicted in the play, from the X-ray and lab techs, to the transporters, nurses, fellows, and physicians. I have never seen any patient treated with such a lack of caring, and I certainly have never seen any patient with the nausea and vomiting and pain of this patient without multiple interventions from the oncology team.

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*Clare Geiser, R.N., B.S.N., O.C.N., is the clinical nurse manager for oncology with the Nalitt Institute for Cancer and Blood Related Diseases at Staten Island University Hospital in Staten Island, N.Y.*

### THE ROLE OF ONCOLOGY

As the diagnosis is made and told to her, Vivian is alone. There is no sign of any significant others in her life. This does not necessarily come as a surprise to the audience, however. Vivian is a dominating, rigid, and imposing figure, as dismissive toward her students as the physicians are to her.

The medical oncologist makes no effort to soften the blow and goes on to read the side effects of the drugs in the latest research protocol for advanced ovarian cancer. He is too brusque to notice that Vivian is no longer with him, but in her own mind, trying to process the fact that she has cancer, advanced cancer. He puts the informed consent form in front of her and she, in her fugue state, signs it. He offers no comfort or compassion, and she leaves on her own.

We then follow Vivian through the steps that unfortunately all patients must go through; however, in my experience, when there has been no support system of family and friends available, then the health “system” of physicians, nurses, social workers, and others is there to take the family’s place. Vivian’s main complaint is that everyone keeps asking her casual, limited questions about how she feels (*How are you feeling today?*). When she does curtly reply (*Fine!*), no one is waiting or listening for her answer anyway.

Soon into her treatment, Vivian meets the physician fellow, who, coincidentally, is a former, disinterested student of hers apparently just as disinterested in her well-being as a patient. The physician reveals that he is only going through the fellowship so that he can move onto his research career

and establish his own laboratory. Vivian even teases him about having to put up with the “humans” in order to reach his goal. Without any hesitation, he agrees with her!

The oncology nurse in the play isn’t much better. She begins as a stereotype, in awe of the handsome new physician. Over the course of Vivian’s eight months of treatment, the nurse and patient form a bond over popsicles and a discussion about DNR. Eventually, toward the end of Vivian’s illness, the nurse becomes her staunch advocate, yet having missed the opportunity to comfort Vivian many times along the way.

The medical community depicted in this play missed an opportunity to help this patient who was so glaringly alone that she took a taxi to the ER with neutropenic fever. Any one of them could and should have demonstrated enough care and compassion so that she would not have felt she died alone.

From an artistic perspective, presenting the medical staff in a compassionate way would have undermined the intended dramatic effect. However, the audience is left with searing images that care for patients with cancer is delivered by cold, unfeeling oncology caregivers. This play could have been more realistically based on a patient treated in the early days of chemotherapy when little was available in the way of antiemetics, and pain management was quite different than it is today. If this is so, I think that the playwright should have made an effort to show that “Wit” does not reflect cancer treatment today. If not, this play is similar to what John Donne is to Vivian’s student—an outdated reflection of the cancer experience. ■