CAPITAL NURSING STUDENTS LEARN TO OBSERVE PATIENTS BY OBSERVING ART

By Kenneth DiMaggio

Usually, you think of student nurses in clinical settings such as hospitals or nursing homes. Through a unique program at Capital Community College, post clinical nurses in John Lagosz and Mary-Joan Forstbauer’s class spent an afternoon looking at art works at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford.

The idea was inspired by a Hartford Heritage Project Workshop that nursing instructor John Lagosz attended last June. By looking at paintings in a more focused manner, students will increase their diagnostic skills, Lagosz noted. “It’s important nurses delve into the whole picture and not just do a quick scan,” Lagosz said.

The docent for the class visit—retired RN Carol Birbara—reinforced this view. “It’s the same thing when you do rounds,” she said. “You don’t do a quick scan, do you?”

Ms. Birbara soon demonstrated the difference between “looking” at a painting for only a few seconds, and spending more time “seeing” a painting. In a 20th century, semi-abstract painting by Connecticut-born artist Milton Avery, Ms. Birbara got students to observe the distinct body language of the couple portrayed in the painting. While the artist depicts their faces abstractly, with few features, the viewer (and student nurse) can still make an assessment of the couple’s emotional mood due to the body language of these figures. “Walking into a patient’s room, body language is also important,” Ms. Birbara observed.

Another modern painting showed students the importance of “reading” a patient’s mood in a hospital setting. In a painting by Andrew Wyeth, a young woman is depicted sitting on a bed before an open window by the sea. Students were quick to now observe the mood of this patient. She looks longingly out the window, one student volunteered. She wants to get out of her bed, another student observed. The rest of the class soon joined in, with many of them noting how the woman in this painting reminded them of some patients in some form of long-term recovery.

By the end of the visit, students were ready to tackle some less traditional, more challenging art work. They got their challenge in a painting by the famous surrealist, Salvador Dali. The docent stopped the class about ten feet away from the painting, where it looked like a face on the beach, a dog above the face, along with some other realistic objects. Upon viewing the painting from only a few feet away, students saw how the face, the dog, and other representationally portrayed objects, were actually made out of other objects. “You can’t always take things on face value,” Birbara explained.

It was a point that nursing instructor Mary Joan Forstbauer—re-emphasized: “That’s the great problem for nursing. You need to dig deeper and look more closely.”

By the end of the tour, the students saw the important connection between painting and clinical nursing. Professor Lagosz was happy to see students make this link between art and science. Lagosz said he would like to take future classes to the Wadsworth. Several of his students also noted how they planned on visiting the Wadsworth on their own, gaining free entrance through Capital’s institutional memberships with the Wadsworth and several other Hartford museums under the Hartford Heritage Program. Before dismissing the class, however, Lagosz reminded students about the unique relationship that art has with nursing.

“Get another pair of eyes in there,” Lagosz advised students when making their rounds in patients’ rooms. “Just like you would for a painting.”