

# THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPASSION IN FRONT-LINE HEALTHCARE DELIVERY

## INTRODUCTION

Given the current challenges facing today's healthcare delivery system, how can organizations and systems support caregivers, enabling them to provide the best possible care for patients and families? How do we protect compassion and human-centered care in the provider-patient relationship? What challenges will help or hinder the delivery of compassionate healthcare?

The Schwarz Center for Compassionate Healthcare hosted a roundtable discussion focusing on the critical role of compassion in front-line healthcare delivery. Three distinct healthcare organizations – a safety net hospital system, a cancer center, and an end-of-life care facility – are each addressing the challenge of maintaining compassionate care despite increasing external pressures.

Leaders demonstrated that compassion isn't just a "nice to have" but is scientifically proven to improve patient outcomes while supporting healthcare worker well-being and retention. Practical strategies like the Schwartz Rounds® program are essential to maintaining this compassion.

The discussion featured Schwartz Center CEO **Michael Gustafson, MD, MBA**, and three leading New York healthcare executives: **Shelly Anderson, MPM**, hospital president of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, **Bruce Flanz, MBA**, president and CEO of MediSys Health Network, Jamaica & Flushing Hospital Medical Centers, and **Michael J. Fosina, MPH, FACHE**, president of Calvary Hospital.

## UNIQUE PATIENT POPULATIONS AND COMPASSION NEEDS

All three of the hospitals represented on this panel have unique patient populations and challenges:

- **Calvary Hospital** is the only acute care hospital in the country that predominantly serves patients at end-of-life, with 85% of patients dying during their stay. They focus on pain management, symptom control, and emotional/spiritual support. They focus on bringing care to the families so they don't need to travel far to see their loved ones.
- **Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center** serves cancer patients, with ~25% of their patient population in clinical trials. They must help their patients deal with the shock, fear, hope, and reality of cancer diagnoses. They have been increasing ethics conversations as families pursue aggressive treatments, and have expanded coverage to more underserved patients.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPASSION IN FRONT-LINE HEALTHCARE DELIVERY

- **Jamaica & Flushing Hospital Medical Centers** are safety net hospitals serving socioeconomically challenged communities, including Medicaid, Medicare, and uninsured patients. Jamaica Hospital is the busiest Level 1 Trauma Center in New York City. They also focus on health-related social needs and hospice care.

### CURRENT HEALTHCARE CHALLENGES

The panelists addressed a variety of challenges facing the larger healthcare ecosystem, as well as the local New York market and their institutions. Issues raised included:

- **Financial and Policy Pressures:** There are significant concerns about potential policy changes that could affect the most vulnerable populations. Proposed cuts could impact between 500,000-1 million New Yorkers, potentially forcing more people to delay care and ultimately arrive at emergency departments in worse condition. Additionally, Medicare Advantage programs can create significant barriers to care approval, making it more difficult to provide timely treatment for the elderly and frail patients who need it most.

- **Workforce Violence and Incivility:**

The healthcare industry has experienced a dramatic three-fold increase in incivility since the pandemic began. Healthcare workers now face unprecedented levels of workplace violence, with incidents occurring as frequently as every 30 to 60 seconds across the U.S. Contributing factors include widespread societal stress, economic uncertainty, and delayed access to care that leaves patients frustrated and anxious by the time they reach healthcare facilities.

“In a safety net hospital, while we don’t have extensive financial assets, we have our workforce—they are our greatest asset... I’m a strong believer in Schwartz Rounds. I attend every session, and we typically get about 200 participants. I look forward to them because I think they’re incredibly important.”

– **Bruce Flanz, MBA**

- **Technology and Workflow Challenges:** While technological advances continue to transform healthcare, they also create new stresses for healthcare workers. System implementations, though ultimately beneficial, create temporary disruptions and additional workload pressures. Healthcare leaders emphasized the critical need for true efficiency improvements rather than simply asking staff to do more with less.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPASSION IN FRONT-LINE HEALTHCARE DELIVERY

The challenge lies in optimizing workflows while maintaining the time and space necessary for meaningful human connections between caregivers and patients.

- **Lack of Discussion Around Advance Care Planning and End-of-Life:** These conversations should occur in ambulatory care centers, with caregivers who have long-term relationships with their patients. Unfortunately, they often happen in emergency situations, and healthcare workers are put into difficult situations with patients and families.

### STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING COMPASSION

- **Support Programs:** Successful healthcare organizations have implemented comprehensive support systems to address both immediate and long-term needs of their staff. The Schwartz Rounds program consistently draws large participation, with some institutions seeing 200 or more attendees sharing emotional experiences and learning from each other. In addition, physical spaces like recharge rooms that offer staff places to decompress and recharge, as well as dedicated wellness offices, programs and leaders were offered as best practices
- **Creative Ways to Encourage Civility:** Leadership team members have explored new ways to ensure that the staff feel supported in the face of incivility and workplace violence. They've explored creative ways to reach patients and family members; they provide 24-hour access to chaplains and social workers, recognizing that emotional and spiritual crises don't follow business hours. Their security staff members have been trained in de-escalation. Additionally, threat management offices with protocols for immediate response help staff feel supported when facing difficult situations with patients or families.
- **Cultural and Hiring Practices:** The foundation of compassionate care begins with intentional hiring practices that prioritize mission-driven candidates who feel fulfilled

“When you attend Schwartz Rounds and witness what people go through as they share their experiences, you see the profound learning that occurs alongside the immediate emotional release and healing that happens in that moment. It's very powerful, and I think it's an amazing program.”

- **Shelly Anderson, MPM**

## THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPASSION IN FRONT-LINE HEALTHCARE DELIVERY

by serving challenging populations. Healthcare leaders emphasized that their greatest asset is their workforce, particularly in safety net hospitals where financial resources may be limited. Developing a team approach, where executives primarily focus on supporting front-line staff who provide direct patient care, creates an environment where compassion can flourish. This cultural development requires sustained effort over time but creates lasting change that benefits both patients and staff.

“When I arrived at Calvary and spoke with staff about their needs, they expressed a need for emotional support. Being able to connect with an organization like the Schwartz Center that has experience in this area—rather than trying to figure it out ourselves—is incredibly helpful. When staff see leadership actively supporting them, it elevates the entire culture and strengthens what they’re doing. This improved culture then helps with recruitment, and better recruitment ultimately reduces burnout.”

– **Michael J. Fosina, MPH, FACHE**

- **Leadership Actions:** Effective healthcare leaders demonstrate their commitment to compassionate care by modelling servant leadership. Leadership teams regularly visit patients to hear their concerns and needs directly, which helps ensure that decision-making remains grounded in actual patient experiences and feedback. Leaders also engage directly with employees in small group settings without supervisors present, creating safe spaces for honest feedback about resources and support needs. Perhaps most importantly, healthcare executives must model work-life balance and self-care, giving staff permission to prioritize their health and families while maintaining their professional commitments.

### NOTABLE EXAMPLES OF COMPASSION IN ACTION

- The discussion featured several powerful stories that illustrate how compassionate care manifests in daily practice. At Jamaica & Flushing Hospital Medical Centers, two painters working late one evening noticed a distressed mother waiting outside the ICU while her son underwent trauma surgery. Without being asked, they stopped their work to talk with her, hold her hand, and pray with her during one of the most difficult moments of her life. This example demonstrates how organizational culture can inspire compassion across all roles, not just clinical staff.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPASSION IN FRONT-LINE HEALTHCARE DELIVERY

“It’s the little things that staff do that make the biggest difference in the care we provide. The Schwartz Center and the Schwartz Rounds create a platform for us to share those meaningful stories with others in our organization. When we have 200 people show up for a Schwartz Rounds, it allows us to tell those stories and gets others thinking. This creates emotional and compassionate support for all staff that resonates throughout the organization and helps sustain compassion in our work.”

– **Michael J. Fosina, MPH, FACHE**

- Calvary Hospital shared the moving story of a daughter who had placed her father’s precious rosary beads on the headboard before he passed away overnight. When she realized she had forgotten to ensure the beads accompanied him to the funeral home, she was devastated to think he might be buried without this meaningful religious item. However, when the funeral director checked, he found that hospital staff had carefully wrapped the rosary beads around the deceased man’s wrist with the cross placed in his palm and his fingers positioned over it. This attention

to spiritual and emotional details reflects the deep compassion that healthcare workers bring to their roles.

- At Memorial Sloan Kettering, nurses organize an annual prom in May for pediatric cancer patients, bringing in formal dresses and suits so children can experience this milestone despite their illness. These examples illustrate how healthcare professionals consistently go beyond their clinical duties to address the emotional and spiritual needs of patients and families, creating moments of joy and meaning during incredibly difficult times.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVANCING COMPASSIONATE HEALTHCARE

- Healthcare leaders must maintain unwavering focus on their fundamental mission of patient care, never allowing financial pressures or operational challenges to overshadow this primary purpose. When leaders feel disconnected from this mission, they should take time to visit patient floors, talk with those receiving care, and engage with team members to be reminded of why their work matters.
- Innovation becomes imperative in the current environment, as organizations must continuously improve processes and workflows. This includes finding better ways



the schwartz center  
FOR COMPASSIONATE HEALTHCARE

## THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPASSION IN FRONT-LINE HEALTHCARE DELIVERY

to coordinate care across the healthcare continuum, ensuring patients experience seamless transitions between providers and settings.

- Investment in programs that support both staff and patients, such as the Schwartz Rounds and ethics ambassador programs, represents a crucial commitment to long-term organizational health. These initiatives provide the emotional and professional development support that healthcare workers need to sustain their compassionate approach to care. Leaders must also address systemic issues that impede compassionate care, including workforce shortages, insurance approval barriers, and access challenges that leave patients frustrated before they even receive treatment.
- The healthcare industry must recognize its role as essential community infrastructure, maintaining operations during emergencies and providing care regardless of patients' ability to pay. This commitment requires ongoing investment in emotional support systems for both patients and staff, acknowledging that the psychological and spiritual aspects of healing are as important as clinical interventions.

The discussion emphasized that while healthcare faces unprecedented challenges, compassionate care remains both achievable and essential for optimal patient outcomes and healthcare worker well-being. Learn more at: [theschwartzcenter.org](https://theschwartzcenter.org)