



NURSES STEP OUT OF A TRADITIONAL CAREGIVING ROLE TO BE PASSIONATE EDUCATORS FOR MEDICAL STUDENTS

Written by Karen Carlson • Photography by James Hawker

Natural teachers

Nurses — they're natural caregivers and compassionate people who are there when it's tough to flag down a doctor. Ever-present to listen, they provide steady comfort. A select group of talented nurses at SIU School of Medicine are still providing this attention — not to patients, but to medical students.

"As caregivers, we were always teaching patients about their illnesses, medications, and answering questions," notes Cheryl Ashburn, R.N., MSN, nurse educator for Year 3. "Nurses are natural teachers."

These master's degreed educators no longer wear the nursing whites or study hospital charts; they are full-time educators of medical students, working in the Office of Education and Curriculum. Helping to usher medical students along the rigorous path of medical training, they are adding to the diversity of knowledge and resources available to SIU School of Medicine students.

While nurses have long soothed the fears and advised medical students in the hospitals and clinics, Roland Folse, M.D., chair emeritus of SIU's Department of Surgery, formalized the position in his department, hiring Norma Wylie, MSN, R.N., as the School's first nurse educator in 1978. Despite some initial apprehension about the idea, Dr. Folse says the faculty and students quickly embraced the program in the Department of Surgery. "They've all done a great job," he says. "They make a difference teaching students."

Eight years ago, SIU School of Medicine revamped its curriculum, and the nurse educator program expanded throughout other departments. Ten nurse educators now serve nearly every department. SIU School of Medicine is one of only two programs in the United States (the other is the University of Southern California) to have nurses in such a structured role as partners in students' education.

Last year, during the School's accreditation visits by the Liaison Committee for Medical Education, the visiting team was greatly impressed and somewhat surprised with the success of the nurse educators. In its final report accrediting the medical

school, the LCME committee cited the nurse educator program as "a unique model for medical student education which enhances the overall quality of the curriculum." While each department has unique demands of its nurse educator, the nurses' commitment to the medical students is universal. Students are their primary focus.

What can nurses teach medical students that physicians can't? Debra Klamen, M.D., M.H.P.E., professor and chair of the Department of Medical Education asserts that nurses are part of the culture at SIU School of Medicine. "These nurses are powerful educators because they have master's degrees and teach full time. They bring a richness and depth to the medical students in the clinical arena. They're completely focused on education, and they're good at it."

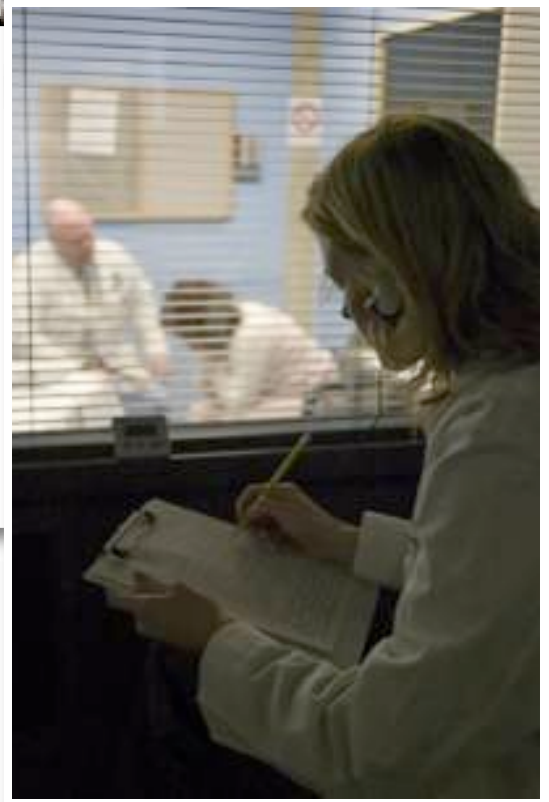
Working with groups of students and one-on-one, nurse educators work closely with students, teaching them how to navigate patient care and the medical education system. They make sure students are getting their requirements; they teach students some clinical skills; they develop, administer and grade exams; they train students to interview patients; many also train standardized patients.

"Nurses bring a completely ego-free perspective to help students improve," Dr. Klamen says. "They also bring creativity, because they were educated in a different set of experiences than medical students are, and their education is quite advanced. I've learned a lot from them."

Although these nurses no longer directly care for patients, they say there's a lot of satisfaction in helping the students find their way. "I feel as passionate about the students as I did about patients," says Karen Reynolds, R.N., MS, a nurse educator for Year 2.

These unswerving educators also can be confidantes to students, lending a sympathetic ear about relationship problems, family difficulties, pregnancies, whatever may be affecting their ability to study.

"We're the non-threatening health-care providers," says Mag-



Nurse educators teach and evaluate students: From top: Staci Becker goes over test instructions; Brenda Yale meets with medical students; Karen Reynolds watches students insert an IV; Becker evaluates a student inside the Professional Development Laboratory.

Tracey Smith reviews students' progress; Staci Becker gives students last minute instructions before their exam; Julie Varns, Brenda Yale and Smith confer in the Professional Development Laboratory. Page 21: Yale and Varns work closely to evaluate students.



gie Boehler, R.N. MS, nurse educator for Year 3. “Students come to us when they need us. That’s really rewarding.”

“Our job is very stimulating and ever-changing,” adds Cathy Schwind, RN, MS, nurse educator for Year 3. “Every student is an individual. Some groups are good, and sometimes we’re almost like moms helping them get along.”

Tracey Smith, APRN, BC, MS, nurse educator for Years 1 through 4, notes that students can be overwhelmed with information and get conflicting instructions from different physicians. “We can bring it all together for them. One of the most exciting things is watching their skills grow across the years.”

For students, these nurses are the bridge between the medical texts and the hands-on work of caring for patients, and the glue that keeps students attached and focused on their studies. Sarah Starnes, '09, says the nurse educators “have been incredibly helpful to me during every phase of my three years at SIU.” During clerkships, she says, the nurse educators have been a “phenomenal resource” to learn techniques, professional interactions and even resolving issues among her classmates. “Attending physicians can often appear intimidating just by virtue of those two letters following their name: M.D. Nurse educators, on

the other hand, are unanimously approachable. There has never been a question I could not ask any of them.”

Omoni Ekhomu, '09, says she feels comfortable asking nurses how to perform certain clinical skills. “They never get impatient; they keep showing me until I get it. They are invaluable to the SIU School of Medicine education system.”

The nurses create an open environment for students to come to them with any question, ranging from “What’s the name of that surgical tool?” to “Where do I park?”

Ekhomu says she shares things with nurse educators that she couldn’t tell an attending. “I once told a nurse educator I was scared about the upcoming exam, and I wasn’t sure if I could do it. I felt like an attending would think I was unserious or unprepared, but I just needed encouragement.”

Nurse educators can give inside information, too, such as teaching budding doctors how to interact with nurses and how to pronounce the complex, multi-syllabic vocabulary of medicine. “I tell them to think of me as your medical thesaurus,” says Brenda Yale, RNC, MS, nurse educator for Year 2 and Year 3. They also encourage confidence in students, telling them “Don’t doubt yourself” and “Trust what the patient tells you.”

Many nurses enjoy moments of patient care as

they're working with students, as Carolyn Holmes, MSN, RN, nurse educator in Year 2 and for Years 3 and 4, describes. "I took a second-year student to the hospital to start IVs with real patients. The patient talked about her recurrence of cancer. I knew the student had just gone through a Professionalism, Attitudes, and Conduct program about end-of-life care. We talked with the patient about her feelings and diagnosis. The student got hands-on clinical experience and also made a connection with the patient."

Shepherding these sorts of encounters, the nurse educators can teach students about compassion, empathy, and caring for the whole patient. Says Ashburn, "We tell students to consider all aspects of patients: their home life, social life, whether the patient afford the medication ... the practical aspects."

Gabriele Hoffmann, PA, MSED, is the clinical educator for Carbondale's first-year students, who are fresh from undergraduate learning. Hoffmann notes it can be quite a big step to go from learning in a lecture hall to the tutor groups and problem-based learning at SIU School of Medicine. "Students are like sponges the first year, but it still is overwhelming. It can be hard for them to balance and prioritize clinical skills and the basic sciences. 'I tell them 'You need to listen well, be objective and open-minded.' The progress they make is amazing."

Several of the nurse educators also are involved in educational research projects, including improving student feedback methods, student outcomes, students' efficiency in taking history and physicals, and research in population health.

These educators also have had input into the SIU curriculum for second- and third-year students and improved processes such as giving students feedback. "They've contributed immensely to the curriculum," notes Dr. Klamen. Sharing the experience over the second and third years of student education, the nurse educators can provide individualized feedback that has made a huge difference for students' progression.

For the busy physician faculty who are managing clinical work, research and teaching, nurse educators allow them to manage their time more efficiently, making better use of the time they are teaching students. Robert J. Pary, M.D., professor and clerkship director in the Department of Psychiatry, says his department's nurse educator, Staci Becker, RN, MSN, nurse educator for Year 3, has been an integral part of building the psychiatry curriculum. "Along with the nurse practitioners in the clinic, nurse educators help me extend what I can do in the time I have."

"Nurse educators have had an enormous impact," says Gary Dunnington, M.D., chair of the Department of Surgery, who has been working with, and advocating for nurse educators for 23 years at four institutions. He adds they are indispensable physician extenders.

"Teaching technical procedures such as inserting catheters, evaluating a critically ill patient, getting comfortable around ventilators, writing excellent progress notes — we wish senior residents and faculty had time to teach these skills to students, but nurses do it extremely well once trained by faculty, and they do it with great enthusiasm and precision month after month."

He notes that many SIU nurse educators have gone on to leadership positions at other institutions, including Marsha A. Prater, Ph.D., RN, who is now senior vice president and chief nursing officer at Memorial Medical Center in Springfield.

"When I get asked what is the one thing institutions can do to improve their programs, I tell them: 'Recruit a nurse educator.' That will make more of a difference in student education than anything else."

SIU's Department of Surgery is the only surgical program in the country with two nurse educators, Boehler and Schwind. Both have received teaching awards every year they've been on the faculty, and the students consistently rate them as outstanding. Nurses from other institutions have visited SIU to talk with Boehler and Schwind about their roles as nurse educators. "I believe Maggie and Cathy are national leaders in defining this role and helping new people understand this position," Dr. Dunnington says.

In a program unique to SIU School of Medicine, nurse educators are valuable partners in helping to create and deliver a streamlined and effective education for medical students.

"SIU is known as an innovative school with an innovative curriculum," notes Dr. Klamen. "When people ask me what they should do to improve their curriculum, I tell them to get nurse educators. Period." ●●●



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