

Case in point

Primary care nursing in practice

Realising their potential: a strategic approach to primary care nursing

Being directly responsible for a team of 18 people across four sites is no mean feat. But that's not all that experienced registered nurse Kathy Godwin relishes about her role as Strategic Manager for Shoalhaven Family Medical Centres. She also ensures that the nursing team collaborates with the other practice staff, including 16 GPs, in servicing 25,000 patients in the local area.

After gaining extensive experience in hospitals, predominantly across the emergency, ICU and coronary care units, Kathy made the switch to primary care nursing, where she has been for the last 11 years. 'It turned out to be a good move,' she says, 'although at the time, I didn't really know the extent of career opportunities for nurses within general practice. Even now, the opportunities are still evolving and coming to light, given the current focus from government on expanding primary healthcare to relieve the burden on hospitals. It [primary care nursing] is an area that is getting more and more recognition.'

When it comes to the scope of her current role as strategic manager, Kathy recognises that it, too, has evolved in leaps and bounds. 'I help to make sure that our four sites work cohesively as one unit, whether that be in applying the latest guidelines and best-practice recommendations, or identifying opportunities to improve our patients' health and our efficiencies. We need to be consistent across the board, which can be quite a challenge.'

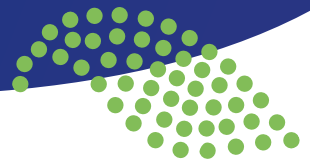
"In a group of practices this big, having someone like Kathy is essential for effective communication between the staff"

'Initially, I didn't have much knowledge about developing and implementing systems and processes. But over time, I've built up that experience and now it's a major part of my responsibilities – and something that I really enjoy. I also spend a lot of time building relationships with key local medical and allied health professionals. This might result in specialists providing education for our staff or in reciprocal agreements so that our patients are bulk-billed for external services. As the only 100% bulk-billing practices within the local area, the latter is a critical factor influencing our patients' compliance.'

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Strategic Manager Kathy Godwin with an Aboriginal outreach worker



Community engagement and patient services represent a key part of her responsibilities, says Kathy. 'It's satisfying to set up programs and services for patients – a great example being the juvenile otitis media clinic that was funded with a grant from our Medicare Local. Through this clinic, we've actually identified eight young children with autism who might have otherwise gone undiagnosed for a much longer period. Without nurses, however, it would be extremely hard to run these sorts of programs and provide the level of care for our patients that we want them to have.'

Leading by example

GP Dr Max Madhavi likens Kathy to an all-important 'middle man' linking the doctors and nurses. 'In a group of practices this big, having someone like Kathy is essential for effective communication between the staff,' he says. 'She's great at receiving feedback about, and disseminating information to, the nurses in order to maintain a happy and productive work environment. Her leadership and management skills are second to none. Kathy not only knows how to recruit nurses whose skill set matches the practice's requirements, but importantly she also knows how to encourage them to realise their true potential. And, of course, she's very good with the patients.'

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It's hard to capture exactly all of the benefits that Kathy brings to the practice and patients, says Max. 'Broadly speaking, though, she is dedicated to optimising patient care, the number of patients we see and the revenue of the practice. Kathy understands that these areas are inter-linked rather than independent. If that isn't enough, she also happily covers nursing shifts if required.'

Kathy believes that a commitment to ongoing education is vital for practices to provide quality patient care – and she certainly practises what she preaches. Not only does she hold a Masters in Nursing, Postgraduate Certificate in Accident and Emergency Care, Graduate Certificate in Advising on Chronic Disease Self-management and Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, she has also taught university nursing students and is currently completing a Diploma of Work Health & Safety.

Fostering a culture of learning is something that the practice endeavours to support financially, says Kathy. 'We provide two paid study days each year for the nurses, as well as pay for courses and conferences. The return is many-fold, with staff feeling appreciated and engaged, while simultaneously expanding their skill base.'

The practice retains quality nurses and can continue to offer, and also add to, its wide-ranging patient services. It's a win-win situation.'

An overview of Kathy Godwin's role

- Leading the nursing team across four sites
- Orientation of new GPs, including those who have not worked with primary care nurses previously
- Liaising with external medical and allied health professionals
- Coordinating staff and patient education
- Initiating patient programs
- Identifying/streamlining processes and protocols to optimise practice efficiencies and patient care (including the implementation of telehealth services)
- Sourcing external patient resources and support services
- Managing clinical risk (including equipment maintenance, cold-chain processes, sharps disposal and clinical-waste disposal)

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