

Case in point

Primary care nursing in practice

Graduating to the frontline of healthcare – general practice

When Jennifer Willis finally decided to pursue a long-held dream of becoming a nurse, she raised a few eyebrows. But after graduating five years later with a Bachelor of Nursing degree at age 51, no one was left doubting her commitment. There was also no question in Jennifer's mind about where to begin her career – at the forefront of primary care, general practice.



Primary care nurse Jennifer Willis with a patient

As a stay-at-home mother of four, Jennifer never thought that she would one day attend university, especially not at the same time as two of her children! Although the days of looking after her own family have now come and gone, her ability to recognise and meet the needs of others has well and truly remained – a valued skill in her current role as a primary care nurse. 'I've spent a lot of time as a carer, not only for my own children but for other people as well,' explains Jennifer. 'These experiences strengthened my belief in the importance of holistic front-line care.'

Jennifer's determination to work in a practice that shared her vision of care led her to volunteer her time for 6 months in order to help land her dream job. 'I had my heart set on one place in particular, KRS Health Family Medical Practice in Wagga Wagga,' she says. 'As a long-time patient, I was impressed by the practice's underlying values and respect for its nurses. I was thrilled when I finally secured a permanent position.'

Dr Peter Keith, a principal GP at the practice, says the partners had long recognised the potential for nurses to increase the scope of their service offering. 'There's now a clear push towards preventative health and easing

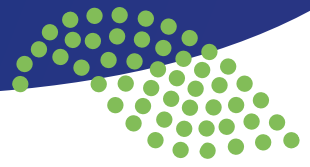
the pressure on hospital resources so it's important for contemporary general practice to align with this imperative.

"There's definitely a place for new and recent nursing graduates in general practice"

'Delivering primary care efficiently and thoroughly is easier to accomplish with additional support from nurses and allied health professionals. By adopting a shared-care model across a diverse group of professionals, teamwork has become a core strength of our practice.'

It's a sentiment echoed by Practice Manager, Irwin Cozens, who is also a nurse and diabetes educator. Irwin says that the decision to shift the nursing team towards more patient-focused responsibilities started some years ago and has well and truly paid off. 'This approach was carefully considered but one that we felt was appropriate for our particular situation and where we wanted to be as a practice.'

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'With the nurses onboard, we've been able to deliver more services to our patients while also realising a financial benefit.

'We're lucky to count Jennifer as one of our five nurses. Not only does she possess a great work ethic and desire to learn, her life experience brings a level of maturity to her role far beyond her clinical years. There's definitely a place for new and recent nursing graduates in general practice. It's just a matter of finding the right practice, namely one that is able to offer plenty of support and guidance. Here at KRS, we also endeavour to work around our nurses' interests and unique skills – that way, when we assign their portfolio of responsibilities, the nurses and the practice are both satisfied.'

The many hats of the primary care nurse

Within the practice, Jennifer plays a significant role in indigenous health and the over-45 health checks and lifestyle clinic. 'I recently secured funding from our Medicare Local to run a juvenile otitis media project in indigenous children – a population at higher risk of chronic ear infections and hearing loss. Although the program has just finished, the experience I gained in implementing the program and recruiting patients was invaluable. This is just one example of how diverse my role is.'

Peter adds that the practice would not be able to offer these types of programs without primary care nurses.

'It's entirely appropriate for nurses to manage these – our GPs just don't have the time or the training. The nurses are also proactive in initiating care plans for chronic conditions. Given the magnitude of chronic disease in the community, this is assured income and much more remunerative than other aspects of practice.' Irwin agrees: 'It's much more lucrative for nurses to set up the bulk of each care plan. We've seen a significant increase in revenue by refining the way we make use of our nurses' skills and expertise in everyday care.'

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There are also plans for Jennifer, who is currently completing an advanced diploma in counselling, to help expand the mental health service offered to patients. 'Mental health issues are also becoming more prevalent so being able to provide comprehensive counselling support in a primary care setting is important. It's great to be able to continue learning new skills – the practice is extremely generous about sponsoring and supporting professional development.'

Primary care nurses are a vital link between the practice's nine GPs and the patients, Jennifer says. 'We're privileged in that we can spend more time getting to know patients and to understand their needs. We then liaise closely with the GPs to identify at-risk patients or those who could benefit from further follow-up. It's a proactive system that improves the health outcomes for patients and, indirectly, the bottom line of our practice.'

Interestingly, Jennifer notes that many of her fellow nursing students didn't share her view on primary care nursing. 'There is a widespread perception that general practice is dull and uninteresting and that the hospital system is the only way to go. In my opinion, that's just not the case – my role delivers a wealth of variety and is very hands-on. I love every minute of it.'

Enhancing care, improving quality: the six roles of the general practice nurse¹

- Patient carer
- Organiser
- Quality controller
- Problem solver
- Educator
- Agent of connectivity

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Reference

1. Phillips CB, Pearce C, Hall S *et al.* Enhancing care, improving quality: the six roles of the general primary care nurse. *MJA* 2009; 191(2): 92–97.