

Case in point

Primary care nursing in practice

Seeing the light: why it pays to employ a primary care nurse

In the words of Dr Gary Kilov, 'a general practice without nurses is unimaginable to me'. So when Gary returned to Tasmania to establish The Seaport Practice in Launceston with colleague Dr Maxine Manifold, he placed as much importance on finding the right nurses as he did on finding the right doctors. Nurse Suzanne Marshall was specifically sought out for one of the positions.



Suzanne Marshall and Gary Kilov

The prospect of working at a practice offering a collaborative model of patient care was extremely attractive, says Suzanne, who had also worked with Maxine previously. 'Given the increasing prevalence of chronic disease, the practice offers a comprehensive range of primary care services,' she explains. 'Patients can access GPs, primary care nurses, dietitians, diabetes educators, psychologists, a podiatrist and an exercise physiologist in the one location. Being able to connect medical and allied health services together so easily is fantastic and can help facilitate patient adherence.'

Primary care nurses can contribute to many different aspects of general practice, says Suzanne. 'A large part of my caseload involves setting up and reviewing chronic disease care plans in conjunction with the GPs. I'm also one of the lead nurses for the over-75 home assessments, a government-funded program designed to help the elderly remain in their homes for as long as possible. By monitoring areas such as trip hazards, diets and requirements for mobility aids, we can intervene early and introduce necessary services and aids to delay, or prevent, the need for aged-care facilities and hospitals.'

“Undertaking such a significant proportion of my work without the support of primary care nurses would be unquestionably difficult”

'Add in managing wounds, conducting ECGs and spirometries, coordinating the travel clinic, educating patients and staff, ordering stock, organising referrals to external services and mentoring nursing students to the mix, and there's never a dull moment. I enjoy the fact that each day brings something different and that I'm not tied to a desk.'

Suzanne also finds time to nurse in the Acute Medical Unit at Launceston General Hospital and says she has the best of both worlds. 'You don't have to choose between a nursing career in general practice and one in the hospital setting – it's possible to do both.'

please continue on the next page



'Gaining experience across such diverse environments is invaluable for my patients, my employers and myself.'

Efficient practices make for optimal healthcare

According to Gary, primary care nurses improve the efficiency and functioning of his practice. 'It's about addressing the needs of patients,' he says. 'The nurses bring a skill set to general practice that complements the expertise of doctors. There's no better example of this than chronic disease – primary healthcare in today's society is geared towards the management and prevention of long-term conditions. Undertaking such a significant proportion of my workload without the support of primary care nurses would be unquestionably difficult.'

"Can you afford not to have a primary care nurse?"

'The multidisciplinary model of care is gaining momentum and understandably so. It's the way forward for general practice. GPs may not have the luxury of spending significant amounts of time with patients, but we still aim to deliver excellence in care – that's where our nursing colleagues come in. Not only do patients appreciate the access to a wider range of services within the one practice, they take comfort from the continuity of care.'

Suzanne says that tag-team consulting enables the practice to better accommodate patient needs. 'Patients with a chronic illness see the GP but also have one-on-one time with a nurse to talk through any concerns, receive education about their condition and set treatment goals. We're also responsible for preparing the care plans for the doctors to review. It would be a big ask if the doctors had to do all this, as well, in the little time that they have with patients.'

'The nurses also perform diagnostic tests such as urinalysis, blood sugar levels, blood pressure measurements and weight checks prior to the patient's appointment with the doctor – it's much more efficient to have the results available for discussion there and then. The end result is that patients receive comprehensive care without feeling rushed out the door. Everyone's happy!' Suzanne points out that this approach also frees up the doctors to see other patients, who may otherwise have had to wait.

When it comes to the question of whether employing a primary care nurse is financially practical, Gary asks: 'Can you afford not to have a primary care nurse? To me, the benefits of primary care nurses are two-fold – clinical and financial – and it's not hard to see why when you can offer extra services and improve the efficiency of the practice simultaneously. Care plans are well reimbursed so it makes sense to direct nursing resources to this area. Our primary care nurses generate considerable revenue.'

The role of the primary care nurse is a dynamic one that should evolve to match the needs of the practice, says

Gary. 'As our business establishes itself and we better understand the scope of services that patients require, we have been able to mould and shape the responsibilities of our three primary care nurses in line with practice and patient needs. The unique skills and interests displayed by each nurse are also key considerations in this process.'

'Importantly, our nurses are well aware of their own limitations – they are experienced, qualified professionals. We are happy to allow them a measure of autonomy commensurate with their level of skill, training and expertise.'

Suzanne says that the practice fosters a culture of support and open communication. 'Gary and Maxine are extremely approachable and have been kind enough to allow time for study and to arrange training for us. It's wonderful to see that primary care nursing is gaining the recognition that it deserves.'

The relationship between primary care nurse and patient

By developing a rapport with patients, primary care nurses can:

- Gather a comprehensive history
- Provide a safe environment to discuss sensitive issues
- Deliver education about the prevention and management of chronic conditions
- Address any concerns or queries
- Set, and monitor achievement of, treatment and lifestyle goals
- Identify any requirement for allied health or external services

www.apna.asn.au

Level 2 159 Dorcas Street
South Melbourne 3205

APNA acknowledges and thanks the Australian Medicare Local Alliance for use of this material.

This resource is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health.

Wellmark APN24702 01/15