



Sue Ann Says: Parish nurses help fill health care void

Audrey was diagnosed with cancer twice. Each time, her physicians told her there was nothing they could do. Audrey, who lives in Waupaca, turned to her parish nurse for guidance. “I talked with her about my diagnosis and the anger and frustration I felt,” Audrey told me. “She would not accept my doctor’s diagnosis and instead found another doctor for me who would try more aggressive treatment. She even accompanied me to my first chemotherapy appointment.”

Audrey’s parish nurse is part of a network of parish nurses partnered with the Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation’s GrapeVine Project. In the first years after I formed the Foundation, my travels around the state uncovered a recurrent theme: Too many Wisconsin women don’t know where to go when they or their family members are faced with a physical or mental illness. The problem is greatest among rural and inner-city women who more often lack access to health care, health insurance and support resources. Again and again, healthcare providers, health educators and women themselves asked the Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation to help with community-based women’s health education programs and materials.

The GrapeVine Project (named for the song “I Heard It Through the GrapeVine), created in 2002, leverages the immense value of parish nursing, particularly among underserved populations. The project offers scholarships to licensed RNs so they can receive the advanced training necessary for parish nurse training. In addition, the GrapeVine Project equips parish nurses with invaluable training and tools so they can provide women with up-to-the-minute education about their most common health conditions: heart disease, cancer, bone disease, mental illness, domestic abuse, and oral health to name a few. Because the need is so great and because the program has been so successful in other parts of the state, the Foundation now is expanding the project into southern Wisconsin.

Experienced professional, trusted friend

A parish nurse, also known as a faith community nurse, is a registered nurse with specialized training and a philosophy of care that centers on the whole person. The parish nurse promotes health and healing within the context of the values, beliefs, traditions and culture of the faith community. Always, the parish nurse strives to connect the physical, psychological, social and spiritual aspects of healing. As a grass-roots nursing practice, parish nursing is ideally suited to respond to the community’s cultural diversity.

Congregations of every faith throughout Wisconsin utilize parish nurses. Some parish nurses are not affiliated with a specific congregation but work in community settings. Their roles vary, depending on the specific needs. Their primary role is to serve as a health educator and liaison. Typically parish nurses provide wellness programs and basic health screenings, with a focus on disease prevention and early detection. They may lead support groups and help individuals and families access a wealth of resources within the community. Although parish nurses don’t usually do extensive hands-on nursing, many act as a personal health counselor, explaining a patient’s diagnosis and treatment options, answering health-related questions, and serving as a patient advocate.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer 13 years ago, I relied on my clinical team for medical treatment. It was the support of my family, friends and faith that gave me the personal strength to get through it. Still, I often felt overwhelmed. First, there’s all the medical jargon. (Doctors speak Latin, right?) Sometimes I didn’t want to take up their valuable time by asking the same questions again

and again. Throw in all the treatment options, intimidating procedures, perplexing policies and mountains of paperwork, and I often felt confused – just when I was most sick and vulnerable.

My experience is common, according to Sue Schaus, manager of parish nursing at Aurora Health Care in Milwaukee. “Many patients fear they won’t understand an answer, so they quickly stop asking questions,” Sue told me. “They need someone to interpret and explain for them. They need someone to say, ‘You can do it; and I’ll be beside you to help along the way.’ The most successful health care consumers know when to seek the help of a trusted teammate ... and often that teammate is a parish nurse.”

Like all the parish nurses with the GrapeVine Project, Pamela Frary, RN, is honored to be that trusted teammate and feels blessed to have the opportunity to help members of Eastside Parishes in Wausau. “Helping people realize how they can be healthier and more spiritual, relieving someone’s suffering or giving someone hope ... that’s why I do parish nursing,” Pamela says.

Ask if your own congregation has a parish nurse. Also check with your library and watch the local newspaper for health education programs and wellness screenings offered by parish nurses. Take advantage of the personal, faith-based care they provide to help you and your family achieve better health. After all, it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,



Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation

The Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts educational forums that focus on prevention, early detection, and connecting individuals to resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. Your donations help WWHF reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.

Side panel: Visit wwhf.org to learn more about the GrapeVine Project and the scholarships WWHF offers to licensed registered nurses for advanced training to complete the Parish Nurse Basic Preparation Program. Parish nurses, who would like to become involved in the Grapevine Project, please call 1-800-448-5148.