

## | HEALTH &amp; WELL-BEING

# NURSE PRACTITIONERS

## Taking on primary care

BY BARBARA RAVAGE

When we go to the doctor's office these days, it's increasingly likely that the medical professional we see is not a doctor but a nurse practitioner, trained, licensed and fully qualified as a primary care provider.

Primary care encompasses both prevention and treatment of acute and chronic illness. Acute refers to conditions that come on suddenly and usually last a short time. They can be as severe as a heart attack or as common as a cold or sunburn. Chronic diseases last longer and may worsen or subside and then recur. Examples of chronic conditions are diabetes, high blood pressure and arthritis.

In addition to treatment, primary care providers (PCPs) offer both continuity and coordination of care, making referrals to specialists when necessary. Preventive care ranges from talking about healthy lifestyle choices – diet, exercise, quitting smoking, for example – to immunizations and screening through examination and laboratory tests to detect potential health problems before they become serious or debilitating.

The role of nurse practitioner as PCP emerged out of necessity. As medical science advanced, medical care became more specialized. As more doctors opted to become specialists, the general practitioner – the family doctor – became an endangered species. But the need for primary care remained and with it the need to have someone looking out for our health who knows who we are, both when we are sick and when we are well.

According to the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, "NPs have



CHRISTINE HOCHKEPPEL/CAPE COD TIMES

**Dianne Schermerhorn is a nurse practitioner who specializes in adult primary care at Outer Cape Health Services in Wellfleet. More and more nurse practitioners are filling in the role once held by general practitioners.**

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DIANNE SCHERMERHORN, ADULT NURSE PRACTITIONER

OUTER CAPE HEALTH SERVICES, WELLFLEET

distinguished themselves from other health care providers by focusing on the whole person when treating specific health problems and educating their patients on the effects those problems will have on them, their loved ones and their communities.”

NPs are guided by clear, medically approved protocols – “It’s like implementing a recipe,” says Dianne Schermerhorn, adult nurse practitioner, who has been at Outer Cape Health Services in Wellfleet since January 2008.

As she explains it, “A good nurse practitioner should be able to manage a medical problem and, if necessary, to access the resources to treat that problem. NPs can assess, do physical exams, order and interpret lab tests

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# Nurse

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and X-rays, and initiate an appropriate treatment plan from beginning to end, in most cases.”

If things do not go according to plan – if, for example, a patient is not responding to treatment or complications arise – the NP will consult with a physician, either a generalist or a specialist, and may refer the patient for specialized care.

Dianne emphasizes the importance of a complete physical. “A good physical lets us pick up things early, before they become problems,” she says. Prior to the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (the new health care reform law) Medicare did not pay for an annual physical, but beginning in January 2011 it will be fully reimbursable for all Medicare recipients.

According to Dianne, a comprehensive physical for older adults includes examining (by listening to, looking at and/or palpating) the heart, lungs, head and neck, glands and abdominal organs and especially important on

the Cape, the skin. A blood pressure reading and blood and urine testing can pick up a range of issues from high blood pressure to high cholesterol, infections, diabetes, anemia, kidney disease and more. Screening and referral for vision, hearing and dental problems are other important aspects of a complete physical. It’s also a time to ensure all immunizations are up to date. Indeed, a physical exam is perhaps the most important preventive health measure of all.

According to the National Institutes of Health, “Having a primary care provider can give you a trusting, ongoing relationship with one medical professional over time.” The American Academy of Family Physicians adds, “Primary care promotes effective communication with patients and encourages the role of the patient as a partner in health care.”

In Dianne’s view, communication and partnership are central to her mission. “I see the nurse practitioner role as the reinvention of the GP (general practitioner). I think that’s a role that’s sorely missed. There is a need for someone who lives in the community, knows a family and its issues, how many dogs they have, when

there’s death in the family, when there’s a marriage or birth. I think the greatest value for the NP role is that it evolves into advocacy and holistic understanding of a person from the inside out.”

She stresses the importance of knowing each individual’s goals, not only for their health but also for their life.

“That needs to be understood before prescribing a treatment plan. A patient’s belief system is very important to me; I champion my patients’ prescription for their own health. No one gets abandoned for unwillingness to comply. It’s never, ‘My way or the highway.’ If the patient feels the least bit ambivalent, concerned or frightened by something, I will keep trying; I will ask what part of it they’re willing to accept.”

In short, she will take the time to talk through an issue, to explain and above all to listen. That’s a rare experience in these times of medical specialization and an overburdened health care system.

Dianne describes herself as a humanist and she has an advanced degree to back up that approach to her work as well as her life. The 62-year-

## Quickhits

### WebLinks

Outer Cape Health Services  
3130 Route 6, Wellfleet  
508-349-3131  
49 Harry Kemp Way, Provincetown  
508-487-9395  
[www.outercape.org](http://www.outercape.org)

American Academy of Nurse Practitioners  
FAQs about nurse practitioners  
[tinyurl.com/yzjumq4](http://tinyurl.com/yzjumq4)

old Malden native exudes warmth as she talks nonstop about the profession she loves and has been practicing for 40 years. The daughter of a nurse and a police officer, she graduated from Boston College with a double major in nursing and philosophy. She added a master’s degree, also from Boston College, and a doctorate in education from Boston University where she specialized in humanistic behavioral studies.

Despite claiming she was never

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meant to be an administrator, Dianne worked as nursing director at Lynn and Union hospitals, two troubled institutions struggling with management and financial challenges in a medically underserved community. She was initially asked to step in to the vacant position for a few months and ended up staying 13 years, doing staff development and a lot of on-the-job training for nurses. Then her focus was changed by a confluence of events: downsizing at the newly merged hospitals and her own return from a medical mission in Nepal.

That's when Dianne had what she describes as an epiphany. Wishing she had more skills, she talked with friends and colleagues, one of whom suggested she would make a good NP. "What the heck is that?" Dianne remembers asking. It was the early 1990s and although NPs first came on the scene in 1965, their numbers were relatively small and the scope of their practice limited. But the more she found out, the more she knew this was the path she was meant to take.

Thanks to her years as a preceptor to Northeastern University nursing students while at Lynn Hospital, she was entitled to take the academic classes she needed tuition free.

"The world just opened up," she says. "I had free credits, the course started the next day. It was the spiritual direction I was supposed to have. Once I pursued it, it had a life of its own."

Within a year she was ready to begin the clinical internship required for certification. Under the auspices of the Massachusetts General Hospital Institute of Health Professions, she spent six months as an intern in Beth Israel's outpatient clinic. When it came time to find a placement for her second six months, Dianne's thoughts turned to Cape Cod.

She had a cottage in Wellfleet where she'd summered for years. In the hope of finding something suitable in or near Wellfleet, she contacted GPs on the mid and lower Cape and landed an internship at Mediacenter Five in Harwich, now Fontaine Medical Center. She remained there when she graduated in 1995. Eventually,

though, the commute became a strain.

By then she had moved to Truro after marrying Jim Schermerhorn, a former U.S. Justice Department lawyer who tried civil rights cases. Jim had made his own career change at 55 when he enrolled in Howard University's health sciences program and became a physician assistant, another health professional increasingly filling the primary care role.

"I was driving 80 miles a day to and from work, and after I got a few speeding tickets in Eastham, Jim suggested I get a job closer to home," Dianne recalls. Outer Cape Health Services fit the bill perfectly.

"There's a freedom that happens at this age," Dianne says. "Jim and I both feel we have a lot to give back with the resources we've been given in our lives: intelligence and health and a common value system. Both of us are trying to make a difference."

Each brought two adult children to their marriage and now have a grandchild. "Our family, dogs, garden, the Cape environment – that all really restores us at the end of a difficult day."

**About the author**

*Barbara Ravage moved to Cape Cod from her native New York City in 2000, after the youngest of her children went off to college. She considers heavy doses of ocean air and Cape light the best cure for empty-nest syndrome. A graduate of Barnard College, she is the author of nine books, including a biography of Rachel Carson for middle-school students and "Burn Unit: Saving Lives After the Flames," which explores the history and science of burn treatment. She balances her writing life with yoga, karate and pottery. After years of making do with two summer weeks on the Cape, her favorite part about living here is that she's already home.*