
Catawba Valley News 10-22-99 pg 1 parish nurse

Checking the soul, not temperatures

For parish nurses, an ear is all it takes to give patients an emotional lift

By MARTI ROOKE

Staff Writer

HICKORY At Catawba Memorial Hospital, some nurses do more than minister to patients' physical needs. The people in the 1-year-old Parish Nursing Program also provide emotional and spiritual support.

Although the parish nurse is hired by the hospital, she works for one or more churches. But it's not a program selling religion, said Patty Tucker, director of Catawba's Parish Nursing Program. "It falls under Catawba Memorial's mission statement to provide health resources – physically, spiritually and emotionally – to the community."

Catawba was the first hospital in the Unifour to offer this program; Grace Hospital in Morganton is planning one now.

Based on needs within a parish, the parish nurse may deal with problems of elderly parishioners, such as interpreting prescriptions, suicide prevention, dealing with grief, suggesting exercise and nutrition programs, or helping a family choose a nursing home.

"I think it takes a special kind of person to be with somebody instead of do for somebody," Tucker said. "That's a lot of what people want. They don't want you to say 'do this' or 'do that,' they want you to listen."

There's a big spiritual component that nurses in a hospital setting are not able to use, Tucker said, because of time limitations and because the patient is not as comfortable in a hospital setting.

"When ministering from a home or church setting, you've got all the time that person will allow you to give," Tucker said.

Catawba Memorial's parish nurse, Joni Graham sees patients from eight eastern Catawba County Methodist parishes and does a lot of listening.

Previously a home health nurse, Graham first read about parish nursing in a magazine.

"I thought, 'What a wonderful concept to have church and health care together,'" she said.

She applied for a job at Catawba Memorial a year ago and found out a parish nursing was available. When she interviewed for the parish nurses' job, Graham thought she didn't know enough about religion to get the job.

"But it's about spirituality and showing people how our minds are connected to our spiritual and physical health," she said.

She received her orientation from Tucker and "I just kind of jumped in." She received certification last summer after taking a course at Queen's College.

She hopes to train volunteers from the parishes to visit shut-ins, and she wants to start a program to provide a break for caregivers in the community.

Catawba Memorial hired a second parish nurse shortly after Graham was hired and will soon hire a third, Tucker said.

The job takes someone open-minded and very flexible, grounded in their own spiritual health – and someone who likes talking on the phone, Graham said.

"I'm there to listen and be a supportive presence in their life," Graham said. "Just in the smile on their face once they get to talk about something, that just makes all the difference in the world."