

# Life after disaster strikes

Rehab RN helps patients adapt to their disabilities and regain their independence.

BY STACEY HALE

Most people never plan to meet Toba Miller. It's only when life takes an unexpected turn because of illness or injury that you might come to know her.

"We often meet patients at transition points in their lives. They're not expecting to go through rehab," says the Ottawa Advanced Practice Nurse.

Miller works with patients who have been through disabling amputations, spinal cord injuries, strokes, and chronic illnesses. She helps them get better, be hopeful, and begin a new and different kind of life.

"Patients are not going to live in a hospital," she says. "Rehab nurses help them adapt to their disabilities, achieve their greatest potential and work towards very independent, productive lives."

In her four years on the job, Miller remembers one man in particular, who, instead of wandering the streets of Paris and Rome, suddenly found himself inside the rehabilitation centre 24 hours a day. In his early 60s, the Ottawa resident had planned to spend his retirement seeing Europe. Before leaving, he had an elective vascular surgery procedure on his leg. Unfortunately everything didn't go as planned. After surgery he experienced complications that led to a prolonged hospital stay, and he couldn't walk on his own. He had to wear an ankle-foot brace, and needed to strengthen his muscles and build his endurance so he could support himself again. It was not the way he planned to spend his post-career years. "When he came to rehab, he was quite angry, and very frustrated," Miller recalls.

Miller's expertise in wound care was paramount to his recovery, since the surgery left him with open leg wounds. Miller led her patient through wound healing therapy and watched for any sign of infection. The man also worked with a team including clinical staff nurses, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers, and psychologists to learn to live again.

Miller says one of the toughest parts of



**NAME:** Toba Miller

**OCCUPATION:** Advanced Practice Nurse, Ottawa Hospital Rehabilitation Centre

**HOME TOWN:** Ottawa, Ontario

her job is supporting patients as they prepare to go home on a weekend pass to try out life in a wheelchair. She says people are always surprised to find how little energy they have, and how much support they need from family when they first go home. When they come back to the centre, Miller talks with them about how things went and what could have been done better. She says it's important to support people as they take these steps because rehab comes along with many different emotions. One day patients may be hopeful, another time they might be angry or sad. She says you have to be able to read them correctly.

"I use all my skills as a nurse to know when to push (patients), when to ease off, and to teach them how to be the directors of their own care," she says.

Miller has been developing those skills

for more than 20 years. She says nursing was a logical career choice because she wanted to have therapeutic relationships with her patients. "We are privileged to be with people at very intimate and very stressful points in their lives when we can truly make a difference," she says.

After graduating from Dawson College in Montreal, Miller worked in medical cardiology and oncology before moving to Ottawa where she's been everything from a clinical staff nurse and nurse manager at a community hospital to an advanced practice nurse in long-term care. Along the way, she also earned two master's degrees. She says everything she learned during her career seemed to lead naturally to rehab, especially the wound care and continence care specialities she developed over the past 10 years. So when a job became available at the Ottawa Hospital Rehabilitation Centre four years ago, she was eager to take on a new challenge.

Rehab nursing hasn't diminished Miller's ambitions and passion for the profession. It's given her the chance to touch the lives of countless patients, including the would-be European adventurer. By the end of his two-month hospital stay, Miller says he was back to his feisty self, and taking the lead in managing his own care.

"He had some ups and downs," she says. "There were some days when I'd see him and he'd turn to me and say, 'You know, today I was supposed to be in Paris.'"

Miller says watching people go home and get back on the road to the fulfilling lives they had before she met them is one of the greatest pleasures of her job. Visits from patients who stop in just to say hello are equally rewarding because she can then see the progress they're making on their own. The last time she saw her patient three months ago, he wasn't yet ready to take on his world travels. But he was walking with one cane instead of two. **RN**

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