

boots & ladders

By Kathy Hardill,

Primary Health Care Nurse Practitioner, Bancroft

Ten years ago, as I walked through Toronto's "brown lands" – a desolate section of the waterfront full of contaminated former foundries – I met a man heading north. Dressed in multiple layers of clothing, he was thin and gaunt. He limped as he pulled a bundle buggy behind him. Over the next few weeks, I saw him again and we developed a relationship. One day, he invited me to see where he lived. It was, without question, the most inhospitable living location I had ever seen – deep in the bowels of a derelict silo. Every time it rained, the silo flooded. Fetid brown water, sometimes containing bloated raccoon carcasses, rushed towards his encampment, wisely built up on wooden palettes above the high water mark. Instantly, I knew what nursing intervention was needed. I bought him a pair of rubber boots to keep his feet dry while sloshing towards his living space.

Today, I work in rural Ontario. One of my clients is an isolated, impoverished elderly woman with a chronic respiratory illness who lives in a leaky, ramshackle cabin. It waits for just the right wind direction to topple it over like a house of cards. As I listened to her lungs during a home visit last fall, she asked me if I would hold a ladder so she could climb up to clean out the eavestroughs to prevent water from overflowing and running into her house. I told her that I would do no such thing! I suggested that she could hold the ladder while I did the chore – a nursing intervention which would reduce the mould growth in her home and improve her respiratory status. She was immensely grateful, but I told her honestly that it was the most satisfying work I'd done all day.

When people learn that I am a nurse, they often ask "what kind of nurse" and, more specifically, if I am a "hands-on nurse." After 22 years of diverse nursing practice, I believe I can now honestly answer this question. Yes, I have advanced nursing knowledge and clinical skills. I can competently diagnose, prescribe, counsel, teach and advocate for the changes that people living in poverty need to secure adequate housing and protect their health. But am I also a "hands-on" nurse? You bet I am.

the voice on the line

By Karen Manning,

Telepractice Nurse, North Bay

Telepractice nurses help patients every day. They also save lives. I am the voice of a telepractice nurse.

I log onto the computer and phone, and a momentary flutter in my stomach tells me my day is underway. Then the phone rings. Emma, a first-time mom, is having trouble breastfeeding. I assess and teach her about nursing positions, milk production and engorgement. I tell her she is doing a wonderful job. She sighs in relief and promises to call back if she gets stuck again. What a great start to my day!

Next is Agnes, calling about her husband of 65 years whose health is quickly deteriorating. He has end-stage lung cancer. Last night at the hospital, he went into a coma. My heart is aching. I listen as Agnes tells me about their marriage and how grateful she is for the time they have had together. I am not sure what to do. She tells me how nice it is to talk to someone who understands. Is that me?

Then Linda calls with a toothache, but I hear breathlessness in her voice that makes me sit up straight. I probe for more answers, and discover she has jaw pain and is tired too. Oh boy. Within seconds, I connect to an ambulance near her home. Two weeks later, Linda calls to thank me. She had a heart attack, and doctors say she is lucky to be alive.

Every day, telepractice nurses are innovative teachers, counsellors, and clinicians. We use exceptional critical thinking skills and clinical judgment. And we make a difference for more than 1.8 million callers annually.

Some people don't think of telepractice nursing as "real" nursing since it doesn't happen in a traditional setting like a hospital or community. I used to hesitate to tell people what I do because I feared their disapproval. Not anymore. Telepractice nursing is the future. I am a telepractice nurse and proud of it. I am a real nurse.