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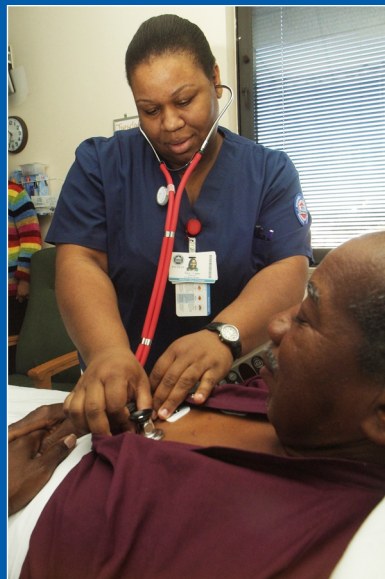
Clinical Nurse Leader Program at MCG Prepares Nurses to Treat Veterans

An innovative partnership between the *Medical College of Georgia* (MCG) and Charlie Norwood Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Augusta will better prepare nursing students who want to treat veterans.

The Dedicated Clinical Nurse Leader (CNL)/Students to Veterans Program allows six MCG clinical nurse leader students to complete three of their four clinical rotations at the VA, fostering a consistent learning-teaching environment that familiarizes them with the health care needs of veterans.

MCG's program is a master's-level program training students to oversee the care coordination of groups of patients.

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Tia Canty, a student in MCG's Dedicated CNL/Students to Veterans Program, examines Calvin Johnson, a patient at the Charlie Norwood Veterans Affairs Medical Center of Augusta, before he is discharged.

For GPC Dental Hygiene Student, Patient, Lessons Learned Were Life Changing



Katie Thompson will walk into commencement at *Georgia Perimeter College* on May 14 knowing her skills as a dental hygienist may have saved one woman's life and improved an entire household's future health.

The first time Thompson looked into Romitechus Robinson-Alexander's mouth, she was shocked by the puffy, swollen, bleeding gums she saw and knew she had her work cut out for her.

"She was on so many different prescriptions, and she had congestive heart failure, diabetes and hypertension. So I knew I had to take an extensive medical history and research the drugs to make sure there weren't any side effects or counter-indications for her conditions," Thompson says.

"Right away, I realized that several of the prescriptions caused swelling, and that's exactly what you don't want with someone who has congestive heart failure."

Thompson explained to Robinson-Alexander the drugs she was taking were also causing her gums to swell and bleed.

GPC Student **Katie Thompson** with patient, Romitechus Robinson-Alexander

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“There are models and research that show we can decrease our medical errors and increase our health care delivery efficiencies if we keep our students in dedicated units,” said program creator **Dr. Janie Heath**, MCG School of Nursing associate dean for academic affairs.

Heath, who worked for several years as a nurse practitioner at the VA, said that, “Although it’s not guaranteed, the hope is that students will return to work at the VA after graduating.”

Tehrae Heflin, a CNL student and U.S. Air Force officer whose mother also served in the military, said he feels a special calling to work in the VA system.


“Without VA medical centers, former servicemen and women like my mother, would not receive necessary health care at an affordable cost,” Heflin said. “I feel that the VA will aid in the mentoring I need.”

Tia Canty concurs. Being the granddaughter of a World War II veteran taught her the importance of VA health care.

“I saw how they took care of him and what a great job they did. I had a lot of respect for those nurses,” the CNL student said.

The goal of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is to have at least one clinical nurse leader on staff by 2012 and at least one in every unit by 2016.

Paula Miller, one of the VA’s first CNLs and also one of the first in the country, has helped several universities begin CNL programs. As the MCG program’s preceptor, she cites the “marriage” between academia and clinical practice as an excellent way to produce skilled and efficient nurses.

“The role and goal of a CNL is to join the clinical environment with the administrative one to achieve the ultimate in patient care,” Miller said. 

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For Thompson, the course was clear. “We have to treat the whole patient, not just the mouth. Nutritional counseling, the extensive medical history, talking to her about her overall health, it all plays a part,” she says. But the problem was about to reach a crisis point for Robinson-Alexander.

“I woke up the next day and the entire left side of my face was swollen. I went to the emergency room, and they said it was from the Lisinopril, which I was taking for hypertension,” Robinson-Alexander says. “I told them a dental hygiene student at GPC had already told me that this drug was causing me to swell, and they couldn’t believe it. A student? Yes, a student caught it before anyone else.”

Unfortunately for Robinson-Alexander, a second crisis also proved Thompson right on another count. A flare-up of the congestive heart failure ended with Robinson-Alexander being taken off of Actos, a drug Thompson had found to be specifically banned for those with congestive heart failure.

“Before Thompson came along and told me how these were the wrong prescriptions for me, I couldn’t lose weight, I could barely walk a few feet, I was always

tired and worn out. But now, I walk everywhere. I have more energy, my wedding band is loose and I’ve lost weight. Thompson has changed my life.” Robinson-Alexander says.

Thompson says, “Before, her gums were so red and swollen that she couldn’t tolerate a deep cleaning without an anesthetic. Now her gums are tight and pink and so healthy.”

For Robinson-Alexander, the biggest change has been in the chronic diseases she has struggled with for years. “My blood sugar levels have dropped, and I can control my diabetes with diet now. I have a new mouth and a new life.”

Robinson-Alexander’s family members have also taken Thompson’s advice to heart. “They couldn’t believe my life got on track because of a student at GPC, so now every time I come back from an appointment at the dental clinic they ask me, ‘what did Ms. Katie say today?’ ” Robinson-Alexander says. “She’s had an effect on the whole house. My parents eat differently, and we all have changed our lifestyles. She is an angel sent from God.”

Beyond doubt, Thompson says, “Ms. Robinson has shown me that what I do makes a difference.” 