"It was a nurse who held me, aided me, saved me, helped me, taught me, inspired me."

– Unknown
Discover Neuroscience Nursing

We shape our destiny in the small and large moments of decision. Unless you’re exposed to neuroscience in nursing school, you might not think about becoming a neuroscience nurse. Those who do explore our field are drawn by the mystery and complexities of the brain. Because we don’t have the capability to measure the workings of the brain in the same way we can attach leads to a heart, we stay constantly attuned to our patients, using our skills of observation to read subtle cues that communicate the tiniest of changes in neural condition. In many cases, a quick response to those subtle cues means a life saved.

As you read this annual report, you’ll learn that the Memorial Hermann Mischer Neuroscience Institute at the Texas Medical Center provides a unique environment for nursing. Nurses drive the units and are involved in decision-making through committees, patient rounds with affiliated physicians and one-on-one meetings with their directors. We’ve made it clear – from the top down – that nurses are valued and equal members of the patient care team. They have a close working relationship with physicians, who rely on them to provide ongoing feedback about each patient’s condition. This dedication to quality and communication recently helped our hospital achieve American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) Magnet® recognition. Organizations that achieve Magnet recognition are part of an esteemed group that demonstrates superior nursing practices and outcomes.

We regard the practice of nursing as a career path. It’s important to me that my fellow nurses think of themselves as professionals making an impact on the lives in their charge – both their patients and their colleagues. If you want to be challenged and rewarded at the bedside, you’ll find that opportunity. If you’d like to move into a leadership position, we’ll help you develop the career you want. At the Mischer Neuroscience Institute, your destiny truly is in your own hands.

We hope you’ll explore neuroscience nursing as a career. If you’re looking to be part of a collective group of nurses, affiliated physicians and other healthcare professionals working toward a common goal, please join us!

With warm regards,

Nicole Harrison, RN, B.S.N., M.B.A.
ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR
MEMORIAL HERMANN MISCHER NEUROSCIENCE INSTITUTE AT THE TEXAS MEDICAL CENTER
Empowering nurses at the bedside to implement quality initiatives has led to dramatic improvements in quality metrics across the Memorial Hermann Mischer Neuroscience Institute at the Texas Medical Center, particularly in the Neuroscience Intensive Care Unit where patients are most at risk.

“We set a goal of reducing our catheter-associated urinary tract infection (CAUTI) rate by 25 percent during fiscal year 2014,” says Allison Murphy, RN, B.S.N., CNRN, quality improvement coordinator in the Neuroscience ICU (NSICU). “A literature review showed that the two populations at highest risk for CAUTIs are neuroscience and burn patients, but there’s not much data specific to the prevention of CAUTIs in neuro patients. Basically, there’s one way to lower the CAUTI rate – if the patient doesn’t need the Foley catheter, it should come out.”

As part of a multidisciplinary quality initiative, rounds were instituted twice a day – including an attending physician, quality improvement nurse, infection prevention, nurse manager and the bedside nurse. The goal was to remove invasive lines from patients as soon as they became unnecessary. To raise awareness, nurses involved in the care of a patient who developed a CAUTI were asked to submit a short overview of their thoughts on the care of the patient and what the nursing staff could have done to prevent the infection.

At the same time, nurses began meticulous screening of patients for urinary tract infections during the first two calendar days after admission, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which resulted in the discovery over a three-month period of more than 40 patients out of 470 who were admitted with a UTI.

“By making this a joint effort between nursing and physicians, we exceeded our 25 percent goal during fiscal year 2014,” Murphy says. “By looking at catheter necessity twice a day, we discovered that many of them weren’t needed. In the NSICU, nurses now have the permission of the medical director to make the decision to remove a Foley catheter if the patient does not meet the guidelines describing the need for the catheter. Over the past fiscal year, we’ve reduced our CAUTI rates in the NSICU by 35 percent.”

One factor leading to the success of this initiative and others was a move to improve nurse performance through metrics transparency. Murphy developed a dashboard, which is posted monthly, showing the individual nurses’ names and their performance metrics.

“The culture here is to own the work you do and be proud of it,” she says. “I love working in a unit like that. We allow nurses to do exceptional work without interference and applaud the ones who do. For nurses who need to improve their metrics in specific areas, we’re here to provide education, coaching and support. Nurses know exactly where they stand from month to month so there are no surprises. It’s a very self-driven quality process.”

Transparency, awareness and education have led to a 58 percent reduction in mislabeled specimens, a 42 percent reduction in blood culture contamination, a 75 percent reduction in falls and a 35 percent reduction in CAUTIs during the past fiscal year.

Building a Self-driven Quality Process Through Transparency, Education and Support

THE MEMORIAL HERMANN MISCHER NEUROSCIENCE INSTITUTE AT THE TEXAS MEDICAL CENTER • 2014 NURSING ANNUAL REPORT
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– Allison Murphy, RN, B.S.N., CNRN
“The improvements we’ve made in quality in the Neuroscience ICU are not just because of one or two people, but because of the work everyone on the unit has done,” Murphy says. “The dashboards are great in showing where each individual nurse stands. We give them the tools, and they run with it. That sense of engagement and empowerment has made a huge difference.”

Leadership at the Mischer Neuroscience Institute helps nurses improve quality in other ways. “We encourage and support nurses in getting certifications,” says Nicole Harrison, RN, B.S.N., M.B.A., administrative director of the Institute. “When they pass their test, they’re reimbursed for costs incurred for certification. Ultimately, certifications help them move up the career ladder and translate to salary increases when they reach that next level in their nursing career.”

Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center also pays for airfare and conference fees to expand opportunities for education and support nurses in learning more about their discipline. Colleen Zuckero, RN, B.S.N., CNRN, clinical education specialist and manager of the Neuroscience ICU, attended the American Association for Neuroscience Nursing Annual Education Meeting, held in Anaheim, California, in March 2014. “There were at least 200 different sessions to choose from, so we had the opportunity to tailor the curriculum to our particular interests and educational needs,” Zuckero says. “The benefit is huge. You improve your evidence-based practice and come back to the hospital and present new knowledge in ways that motivate nurses to improve their own practice. It spark[s] initiative and inspires them to begin research projects to be presented at future conferences. I think of everyone on this unit as a potential educator. We’re all learning, teaching and working to improve quality. When I hear nurses say that what they do at the bedside isn’t really leadership, I tell them, ‘No! You’re leading the country by setting national benchmarks.’”

Paul Gordon, RN, B.S.N., SCRN, CNRN, attended the 2014 International Stroke Conference held in San Diego in February 2014 and describes the experience as very enlightening. “It gave me a new view of my practice and also made me aware that we could improve the quality of research if more nurses were involved,” he says. “My goal is to attend every national stroke conference and encourage my colleagues to do so as well.”

Gordon, a staff nurse on the Stroke Unit and chair of the Unit Practice Council, shared what he learned at the council’s monthly meeting. “Everything we learn and share helps our practice,” he says. “New nurses here will find people who open their arms and help. They’ll find proper compensation in a welcoming environment, as well as support for achieving...
certifications and an emphasis on conducting and publishing research to be presented nationally.”

Nurses interested in leadership roles can apply for the Nursing Leadership Development Academy, which was established by Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center chief nursing officer Victoria King, M.H.A., M.S.N., RN, CNOR, NEA-BC. “We’ve graduated one class and are finishing up our second,” she says. “The academy is closely linked to quality improvement because of our focus on evidence-based best practices. Nurses begin to understand how we’re driving quality at the uppermost part of the organization. The grand thing is that eight of them from the first class of 30 have been promoted to leadership roles.

“Nursing has a voice at our hospital, and nurses play an important role in creating our processes,” King adds. “We support them through incentive programs for critical staffing, preceptor bonuses, certification reimbursement, service awards, nomination of nurses for local and national awards, handwritten letters from senior leaders for outstanding performance, continuing education opportunities and paid travel and attendance at conferences, to name just a few things we do to encourage quality. Our nurse retention rates are proof of our success. In the future nurses will have even more responsibility and autonomy. As the focus of healthcare reform moves toward keeping people healthy, nursing will become even more important. As nurses, we teach health. Opportunities will abound for us to lead the way.”
Two semesters short of graduation from nursing school, Dara Lewis began having severe headaches. In a sudden shift from student nurse to patient, Lewis worked her way through the referral process from primary care physician to neurologist to neurosurgeon. In October 2011 she found herself in an examination room at the Memorial Hermann Mischer Neuroscience Institute at the Texas Medical Center with Dong H. Kim, M.D., director of the Institute and professor and chair of the Vivian L. Smith Department of Neurosurgery at UTHealth Medical School. Dr. Kim recommended immediate surgery for fenestration of an arachnoid cyst and placement of a ventriculoperitoneal shunt to continuously drain the fluid.

“I explained to him that I was in nursing school,” says Lewis, who was enrolled in the associate degree in nursing program at College of the Mainland in Texas City, Texas. “Our curriculum was fast paced and very competitive, and I couldn’t just stop, so he worked around my schedule. I took my fall semester final in December 2011 and had surgery the next day.” She recovered during winter break and returned to nursing school in January 2012.

“I was leaning toward neonatal nursing or labor and delivery but then Dr. Kim found the arachnoid cyst and I had major brain surgery. He suggested that I talk with the administrative director of nursing, Nicole Harrison, who came in to meet me the day after my surgery. She gave me her card and asked me to contact her when I was close to graduation. When I graduated I couldn’t wait to be part of the team that had taken such good care of me.”

Lewis started at the Mischer Neuroscience Institute in July 2012, just after graduation. During her first year, she attended lectures and symposiums on stroke, traumatic brain injury, EKG monitoring, documentation and unit protocols.

“If you’re new to neuroscience, the Institute supports you with education through your first year. Neuroscience nursing is very detailed, very specific and very focused. We have to be patient and understand that stroke and brain injury patients may not be able to communicate with us easily. You work with one patient who’s had a stroke and you educate an entire family. In the process, we learn more about our discipline.”

Lewis often shares her story with patients who are frightened about upcoming brain surgery or a new diagnosis. “I really relate to these patients and want to be the person they can look to for support—

“Every day I live my personal story. I’m a nurse and I’m also still a patient.”

– Dara Lewis, RN, A.D.N., Charge Nurse, 5 Jones
someone who knows what it’s like to be in the hospital bed,” she says. “When they express their gratitude, it’s the best feeling in the world to know that I’ve touched their lives in a positive way.”

Lewis was promoted to charge nurse in January 2014, a year and a half after she started at the Institute. She is currently enrolled in the bachelor’s degree program at The University of Texas at Arlington, with support from the Memorial Hermann tuition enrollment program. “It’s wonderful to have an educational benefit that goes with your job,” she says. “After I finish my bachelor’s, I’d like to move to the Neuroscience ICU for more critical care experience and then continue in a master’s degree program. My long-term goal is to move up in management or education.

“I’m honored to work with a great team of neuroscience nurses and supportive physicians,” she adds. “Every day I live my personal story. I’m a nurse and I’m also still a patient – I had my fourth brain surgery in June. I know our doctors, our hospital and my co-workers will always take good care of me. I love them, and I trust them with my life.”
Rob Couchman, RN, B.Sc.N.
A Canadian Finds a New Home at the Mischer Neuroscience Institute

Rob Couchman came to the most honored and trusted profession in a roundabout way. He began his undergraduate education in computer engineering in his hometown of Peterborough, Ontario, about an hour and a half north of Toronto. “I’m very technical and love working with my hands, and I also like working with people,” Couchman says. “About halfway through my computer engineering program, I discovered I would have almost zero human contact if I stayed in the field.”

In the course of making an important decision about his future, he won a scholarship to the nursing program at Trent University in Peterborough. “With the scholarship and opportunity that came with it, it became clear that my destiny was in nursing.”

After graduating in 2009, Couchman went to work as a staff nurse on the stroke unit at Peterborough Regional Health Center, where he provided outstanding care for four years. He met Nicole Harrison, RN, administrative director of nursing at the Memorial Hermann Mischer Neuroscience Institute at the Texas Medical Center, and several of her team members at a healthcare career fair in Toronto in 2013.

When he was offered a position as a staff nurse on the stroke unit at the Mischer Neuroscience Institute, the decision was an easy one. “As soon as I met Nicole and the team, I knew this was the direction I was meant to take,” he says. “I had been to the States many times, so a move to Texas wasn’t inconceivable. The opportunities for advancement in Canada were limited at the time, and the opportunities at the Institute seemed endless. Working as a neuroscience nurse at a hospital with a Level I trauma center was also very appealing to me.”

“Neuroscience is a fast-paced, innovative and rewarding area in which to work.”

– Rob Couchman, RN, B.Sc.N., Staff Nurse, Stroke Unit

Couchman, who is passionate about his work at the bedside and also has an interest in process improvement, won the Daisy Award for extraordinary nursing after three months on the stroke unit. The award, created by the Daisy Foundation in memory of J. Patrick Barnes, is presented monthly in partnership with healthcare organizations and tailored to each hospital’s unique culture and values to provide recognition of the clinical skill and compassion nurses demonstrate at the bedside. “Winning the Daisy Award was a huge honor for me,” he says.

“Neuroscience is a fast-paced, innovative and rewarding area in which to work. It can be very
demanding, but I find it a wonderful challenge,” he says. “You have to work from a solid base of knowledge and at the same time keep a very close eye on the subtle changes in the condition of each of your patients. On the stroke unit, the collaboration between nurses, therapists and doctors is very tight. As the nurse, you advocate for the patient and make sure there’s good communication about each patient between all members of the care team.”

What’s next for Couchman? “Who knows? Maybe I’ll develop an interest in education or management as time goes on,” he says. “Right now I’m very happy working as a staff nurse. We’re a close-knit team on the stroke unit. I love it here. I wouldn’t work anywhere else.”
Leaders in Neuroscience Nursing

More than 175 registered nurses – and a total of 236 employees – have been recruited in the past three years to keep pace with the rapid expansion of the Memorial Hermann Mischer Neuroscience Institute at the Texas Medical Center. Many of the nurses started at the bedside and quickly moved into leadership positions. Their management style is based on an understanding of the needs of bedside nurses, and they work together across units to provide support and encourage creativity, autonomy and teamwork.

Among them is Odun Atunrase, RN, B.S.N., clinical manager of the Spine Unit, who started as a floor nurse in 2009 and moved up to charge nurse shortly afterward. By 2012 he was a team leader in a pilot project designed to improve the customer experience by rounding on patients and families to ensure that their needs and expectations were met. In February 2014, he was promoted to manager of the Spine Unit, which had opened a few months earlier as a specialized unit in a renovated space. He had a plan in mind.

Atunrase describes himself as a “big believer” in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, a pyramid with the largest, most fundamental levels of human needs at the bottom and the need for self-actualization forming the peak. “I took the hierarchy beyond the level of the individual and began to apply the principles to my unit,” he says. “To get to a place of self-actualization as a unit, we had to work our way up the pyramid from physiological needs, to safety, then belonging and self-esteem.”

After making sure his unit was adequately staffed and supplied – the physiological needs – he moved on to safety, which he defined as staff education, orientation to the unit and role, and understanding hospital policies and the fundamentals of customer service.
“We support our staff members and at the same time are supported by the entire leadership team. If we let them know what we need, they will help us get it. That support from leadership has made a huge difference in the growth of the neuroscience service line.”

— Shanequa Sostand, RN, B.S.N.
"Safety is also linked to accountability, effective performance and meeting outcome metrics," Atunrase says. "Then we moved on to the higher-level need to belong. I wanted to make sure our team had a cultural identity. We knew our strengths were proactiveness and teamwork. We reviewed and reinforced that in one-on-one meetings so that everyone felt engaged. We also had weekly staff huddles and made sure every staff member had input, paying special attention to our new nurses."

At the same time, Atunrase’s unit started to lead the neuroscience service line in HCAHPS scores and has placed either first or second at Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center, among all service lines, since December 2013. In March 2014, his unit received the hospital’s quality award for outstanding customer satisfaction. By that time, seven Spine Unit staff members had received standing ovations at weekly patient experience meetings attended by hospital executives. “We had great scores and knew we had built a team, which met our need for self-esteem,” he says. “Then we moved to the self-actualization part – philanthropy, creativity and fulfillment. We really wanted to set an example as a group and find the meaning in what we’re doing. Managers from units outside the Mischer Neuroscience Institute now ask us if their staff can orient with us. We’re acting from the heart and touching others in the process.”
Shanequa Sostand, RN, B.S.N., worked as staff nurse for five years before starting at the Institute in 2008, where she spent her first four months at the bedside in the Stroke Unit. She was promoted to charge nurse and in January 2014, to manager of the Stroke Unit.

Sostand describes her management style as a mix of engagement, empowerment and teambuilding. “I truly have an open door policy,” she says. “We support our staff members and at the same time are supported by the entire leadership team. If we let them know what we need, they will help us get it. That support from leadership has made a huge difference in the growth of the neuroscience service line.”

Transparency on the units has encouraged accountability and empowerment. “When it comes to performance evaluations, there are no surprises here,” Sostand says. “Our quality metrics and each nurse’s success at meeting them are posted monthly. We’re here to help those who aren’t meeting the metrics improve their performance.”

Daily rounding with attending physicians empowers nurses by allowing them to make decisions about patient care with the doctors, who consider their input on patient condition invaluable. “We’re at the bedside 24/7,” she says. “When nurses round with physicians, they help develop the plan for the day. If patients or family members have questions about the plan, we can answer them because we’re all on the same page.”

Clinical director of patient care Enedra Allen-McBride, RN, M.S.N., started at the bedside at Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center in 2003, and worked there for a year and a half before moving to The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, where she climbed the career ladder to associate director, working under Nicole Harrison’s leadership. Harrison recruited her back to the Mischer Neuroscience Institute in 2011.

As clinical director of the neuroscience service line, Allen-McBride is responsible for providing leadership, direction and support to patient care areas. She is heavily involved in the day-to-day operations of the seven units that report to her – mentoring managers and quality coordinators on budgeting, management, quality and leadership skills.

“I meet with each manager once a week to discuss what’s going well and the concerns and challenges they face,” she says. “I round on the units, which gives me the opportunity to get to know our staff. We have over 300 employees and I take pride in being able to recognize each one of them and have conversations with them. I want them to know me, and put a face to a name. Leadership is not just about what we do at work but getting to know them personally.

My relationships with my managers keep me connected to the staff and unit.

“It’s especially important to me to know my managers,” Allen-McBride adds. “They’re on the frontline and have the hardest job. My door is always open and if they need me after hours, they know I’m always available. The opportunity and support Nicole has given me trickles down. I pay it forward to my managers. It’s exciting to work in an environment that fosters growth among all our colleagues, and it’s just going to get better. We’re dedicated to our patients, our people and the extraordinary work we do each and every day.”

Dong Kim, M.D., director of the Institute and professor and chair of the Vivian L. Smith Department of Neurosurgery at UTHealth Medical School, recognizes the important role nurses play as advocates for neuroscience patients. “Because they’re at the bedside the majority of the day, they ensure that the medical plan stays on course and keep affiliated physicians informed of even the smallest change in patient status,” he says. “Having well-trained, dedicated neuroscience nurses is essential to producing superior outcomes and to realizing our vision for the future at MNI. We want our nurses – whether they’re at the bedside or in management – to participate fully in creating that vision by sharing their ideas as equal members of the team.”
Shanequa Sostand, RN, B.S.N.
A Passion for Stroke Care

There was never any question that Shanequa Sostand would become a nurse. As a young girl growing up in Port Arthur, Texas, she volunteered at the hospital where her mother worked as a nurse manager. By the time she was 17, she was working as a nurse apprentice during summer breaks.

“I grew up in the hospital and never really thought there was any other profession,” says Sostand, who completed her first two undergraduate years at Prairie View A&M University in Prairie View, Texas, and graduated from The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston with a bachelor’s in nursing. “While I was in nursing school my grandfather had a stroke, and I was very active in his care, which spurred my interest in stroke care and patient and family education.”

Sostand was working as an oncology nurse on the med/surg unit at Memorial Hermann Southwest Hospital in 2009 when she was offered a position as a stroke unit nurse at the Memorial Hermann Mischer Neuroscience Institute at the Texas Medical Center. She jumped at the chance. “Number one, I wanted to be back doing what I really loved on a dedicated stroke unit,” she says. “At the same time, the Institute was beginning to restructure its neuroscience nursing team to focus more on quality and customer service.

In the few years I’ve been here, we’ve revamped the leadership team and changed across the board the way we staff and supply all units. We also upgraded the stroke unit and expanded from eight to 12 beds and have access to resources we didn’t formerly have. All this has allowed us to improve our core measures dramatically.”

The Mischer Neuroscience Institute received advanced certification as a Comprehensive Stroke Center by The Joint Commission and the American Heart Association/American Stroke Association in 2013. “It was the first stroke center in Texas to be certified at that level, which is many steps higher than our previous Primary Stroke Center certification,” she says. “During that same time our service line continued to grow.”

In April 2013, Sostand was accepted to the Nursing Leadership Development Academy (NLDA) at Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center. The NLDA provides growth and development opportunities for nurses who wish to pursue leadership roles and enhance their existing leadership abilities while developing new skills through didactic curricula and mentoring with hospital leaders.

During her year of leadership training, Sostand participated in two days of international panels,
seminars and breakout groups at the Fourth Annual Global Nursing Conference held in Houston in May 2013. Later that year, she attended the American Nurses Credentialing Center Magnet Conference® in Orlando, Florida. “Through these and other opportunities, I’ve learned a lot about myself as a leader,” she says.

Like other nurses on the stroke unit, she’s studying for her Stroke Certified Registered Nurse (SCRN) certification. “We’re very specialized and committed to going the extra mile for our specialty,” she says. “Having the certification is a visible testimony to that commitment. Our goal is to have half of our nurses stroke certified within the next year.”

Sostand, who was promoted from charge nurse to manager of the stroke unit in 2014, envisions a future in which she grows her management skills. “I’m still a new manager,” she says. “Right now I’m focusing on learning what I need to know to sharpen my management skills. We have a really supportive leadership team, which is what drives us to keep improving. If we let them know what we need, they will help us get it. They’re not just in their offices. They’re out on the units working with us to find ways to make our jobs easier and help us improve patient care.”
By the time he was 18, Austin Schultea was a volunteer emergency medical technician in northwest Houston, with plans to become a doctor. He was accepted into the premed program at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, and graduated in 2010 with a bachelor’s in biology.

“I had a strong background but wasn’t accepted into the medical schools I originally applied to,” Schultea says. “So I stepped back and considered my options. Did I want to apply to other medical schools? Did I want to consider other opportunities in health care? I talked with a family member who’s a nurse and saw how she was involved in direct patient care on a daily basis. She had a lot of autonomy and worked with a lot of interesting cases. In the end, after some exploration and a lot of soul searching, I decided nursing would be a good option. Ultimately, the purpose of what we do in health care is to improve the health and emotional aspects of the lives of our patients when they’re going through a hard time. Nursing offers a great opportunity to really make an impact because we spend so much time with our patients.”

“I’ve always been fascinated with neurobiology and the origin of consciousness, and have a passion for anything relating to the brain. Obviously, the Neuroscience ICU was my first interest.”

Schultea received his bachelor’s in nursing at Texas A&M Health Science Center in Round Rock in May 2013, after completing a 15-month accelerated second-degree program. Immediately after graduation he accepted a position as a staff nurse in the Neuro ICU at the Memorial Hermann Mischer Neuroscience Institute at the Texas Medical Center. “Having worked as an EMT in Houston, I was well versed in trauma centers,” he says. “I was impressed by the trauma center at Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center and by the idea of working at the largest medical center in the world.”

At the Mischer Neuroscience Institute, Schultea found the autonomy he sought. “In the Neuro ICU there’s a very close and strong relationship between the doctors and nurses,” he says. “They rely on us to update them regularly on patient status and make recommendations about care. Working in an environment where nurses are respected as a
vital member of the care team is a great experience, especially for my first nursing job. I’ve gained a lot of confidence in my skills during the past year.”

Schultea enjoys the technical aspects and science of his job and the human element of working with families. “Because we’re an open unit, we have up to two family members visiting throughout the day. Providing good care on our unit is heavily dependent on interactions with family as well as close monitoring of the patient. We make sure they’re kept informed and are comfortable with the care their family member is receiving.”

Schultea is considering two pathways for the future and believes both are attainable with the experience he’s gaining. “I’m fascinated by how hospitals work,” he says. “So hospital administration might be an option for me in a few years, after I build a solid base as a bedside nurse.” He’s also considering going back to school for certification as a registered nurse anesthetist, with an eye to working in pain management or in the OR. “We have the support of leadership here to pursue administrative roles if we want them. Our destiny really is in our own hands.”
When neuro-intensivist Kiwon Lee, M.D., FACP, FAHA, FCCM, accepted the position of director of neurocritical care at the Memorial Hermann Mischer Neuroscience Institute at the Texas Medical Center in 2012, he came with a plan – to build strong collegial relationships between physicians and nurses, particularly in the Neuroscience Intensive Care Unit.

“When I started here, doctors were rounding on patients and writing orders for nurses to carry out later. We consider that outdated medicine,” says Dr. Lee, an associate professor in the department of Neurology and the Vivian L. Smith Department of Neurosurgery at UTHealth Medical School. “We want to be proactive in providing care rather than reactive, and quick administration of critical medical treatment can occur only when communication is seamless. Nurses have to be part of the discussion, which is why they round with us. When they give their input and make decisions with us, there’s no lag between the decision-making process and the execution.”

Dr. Lee is also a strong proponent of education. “When nurses and doctors are on the same page, communication is efficient,” he says. “We consider nurses our partners and want them to be as knowledgeable as we are about the patient. This is the only way to provide excellent critical care service and produce better outcomes.”

Cultural change at the Mischer Neuroscience Institute has been formalized through eight committees, each co-chaired by a nurse and a doctor. Tiffany Chang, M.D., co-chairs the Clinical Practice Committee with Colleen Zuckero, RN, B.S.N., CNRN, clinical education specialist and manager of the Neuroscience ICU. “Collaboration is critical to the care of neuroscience patients. It’s no longer a culture of doctors giving orders and nurses following them,” says Dr. Chang, an assistant professor in the Vivian L. Smith Department of Neurosurgery at UTHealth Medical School. “The nurse is an active member of the treatment team, rounding with us in the morning and advocating for the needs of patients. They know the patient best because they’re at the bedside 24/7. We respect their input as an important member of the team.”

The new committee structure plays a vital role in continuous quality improvement. “For example, data collected by the Quality and Safety Committee provides information that aids the Clinical Practice Committee with process improvement initiatives,” says Nicole Harrison, RN, B.S.N., M.B.A., administrative director of the Institute. “If we discover a need to reeducate nurses based on the data, the Staff/Nursing Education Committee puts together a plan and disseminates the information. The new structure ensures that nurses and doctors alike are aware of everything that goes on in the Neuroscience ICU. It also positions us as equal partners on the patient care team. Nurses can agree or disagree. It’s complete equality.”

H. Alex Choi, M.D., chairs the Critical Care Research and Evidence-based Practice Committee with Christina Luther, RN, and the Cerebrovascular Committee with Christine Glendening, RN. “The challenges nurses face are different than the challenges doctors face,” says Dr. Choi, an assistant professor in the department of Neurology and the Vivian L. Smith Department of Neurosurgery at UTHealth Medical School. “Nurses are on the frontlines around the clock. When we work together cohesively and creatively, our patients benefit. We understand that it’s the nurses who take care of patients. If physicians and nurses are not on the same page and moving in the same direction, treatment becomes fragmented. Families don’t understand what’s happening to their loved one and our patients suffer. With good communication and teamwork, everyone excels in patient care and academic development.”
“We consider nurses our partners and want them to be as knowledgeable as we are about the patient. This is the only way to provide excellent critical care service and produce better outcomes.”

– Kiwon Lee, M.D., FACP, FAHA, FCCM
Jorelyn Lucenio-Ga-an, RN, B.S.N.

Tears of Joy

Jorelyn Lucenio-Ga-an comes to nursing from a place of gratitude. “Nursing was not my first dream – I wanted to be a doctor,” she says. “Due to financial constraints, that was impossible for me. I realized that by being a nurse I could accomplish two of my goals: get my family out of poverty and provide care to people when they are in need. When I look back at the kind of life I had, I cry – but these are tears of joy. The hardship I experienced in the past has helped me reach my goals, and I’m grateful to be where I am now.”

A staff nurse in the 13-bed, state-of-the-art Epilepsy Monitoring Unit (EMU) at the Memorial Hermann Mischer Neuroscience Institute at the Texas Medical Center, Lucenio-Ga-an graduated from the top-notch nursing program at West Visayas State University in Iloilo City, Philippines. She credits the dedication of her clinical instructors, mentors and Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center with helping her achieve her career objectives and preparing her for the practice of neuroscience nursing.

Lucenio-Ga-an and her husband John Jones Ga-an, RN, who works in the neuroscience acute care and intermediate care units, were recruited to Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center in 2001, while they were practicing nursing in Muscat, Oman. But it took nearly two more years of practice in Dublin, Ireland, to complete the required tests to secure a visa.

“Because we’re working with the brain, we have to be very attuned to our patients. Even the smallest change in condition provides us with vital information important to making the right decision about appropriate treatment.”

– Jorelyn Lucenio-Ga-an, RN, B.S.N., Staff Nurse, Adult and Pediatric Epilepsy Monitoring Unit

I’m very grateful,” she says. “Since I started in the Epilepsy Monitoring Unit, I’ve seen a huge growth in our area of practice. We have the most advanced treatments available for the management of epilepsy. We’ve added more affiliated board-certified neurologists and neurosurgeons who specialize in epilepsy, and seen an increase in the number of
patients who come from across the United States and around the world. We work hand in hand with the doctors, collaborating closely to provide the best care to our patients."

Lucenio-Ga-an believes her rich experience in neuroscience enhanced her knowledge and skills in providing care for epilepsy patients. “Because we’re working with the brain, we have to be very attuned to our patients. Even the smallest change in condition provides us with vital information important to making the right decision about appropriate treatment. The doctors acknowledge our assessments and observations and trust us to provide the appropriate care.”

She considers serving patients in the EMU an honor. “The experience is very humbling for me. I’ve developed a passion for critical care nursing, particularly in neuroscience. I’m happy being part of a team that helps more and more people with epilepsy control their seizures and improve their quality of life. I love the work I do, and I thank God every day for guiding me to do my very best.”
When anyone asked Nicole Harrison what she wanted to be when she grew up, she always said, “A nurse.” Her passion for nursing began on the family side.

Harrison’s mother, who was a nurse, married her physician stepfather when Nicole was seven. “When I was young, I was drawn to both cardio and neuro nursing,” she says. “My paternal grandfather and father both suffered heart issues, and then my cousin suffered a severe head injury in an automobile accident when we were both 19. He was enrolled at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth and I was a student at Baylor University in Dallas. We had to make the difficult decision to withdraw life support, which was devastating for my family and life altering for me.”

Harrison accepted a position in neuroscience nursing at Medical City Hospital in Dallas after graduating with her bachelor’s in nursing from Baylor. In 1997, with five years of experience on her resume, she moved to Houston to accept a position in the Neuroscience ICU at Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center, where she worked first at the bedside and later as clinical manager.

In 2005, she was recruited to a management position at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, where she remained for six years.

In 2011, while standing in the cafeteria line at Memorial Hermann-TMC, she heard a familiar voice. It was Dong Kim, M.D., director of the Memorial Hermann Mischer Neuroscience Institute at the Texas Medical Center and professor and chair of the Vivian L. Smith Department of Neurosurgery at UTHealth Medical School. The two had worked together in the early 2000s, when he was an attending physician and she was clinical manager of the Neuroscience ICU. In 2007, he was recruited

“The practice of nursing

Nicole Harrison, RN, B.S.N., M.B.A.
All for One and One for All

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– Nicole Harrison, RN, B.S.N., M.B.A., Administrative Director
back to Houston from leadership positions at Brigham and Women’s Hospital and Harvard Medical School to lead the Mischer Neuroscience Institute to a position of national and international prominence.

“We talked, and he shared with me his vision of a quality neuroscience program,” Harrison says. “He recognized the importance of nursing support and knew he needed a nursing leader who wanted to move in the same direction. He’s an excellent physician and a visionary who can see beyond the present and continue to work down a path to bring about major change. He’s the reason I came back.”

When Harrison took over as administrative director, the nursing units at the Institute were operating in silos. “Nurses in one unit had no relationships with the nurses in other units. As I rounded on the units, I encouraged them to support one another. We had to break out of those silos and create an atmosphere where we’re all brothers and sisters in this together. It’s that Musketeer model – all for one and one for all.”

Harrison worked on hiring the right staff to help the organization move forward. “Then it was a matter of building trust with the physicians,” she says.
Nicole Harrison, RN, B.S.N.
All for One and One for All

“Dr. Kim is very supportive of nursing and has been helpful in improving the physician-nurse relationship. Nurses want to know they’re listened to as valuable members of the team. Physicians want trained and reliable neuroscience nurses. We’ve set quality metrics for ourselves and met them, which has instilled a sense of professionalism in our team.”

Harrison describes her nursing career as “interesting and fortuitous. You’re supposed to have a five-year plan. I’ve never looked at my career or life and said I want to do this for five years and move on. Instead, I’ve put my head to the ground and worked hard, with the idea that opportunities will come when I’m ready for them.

“In the end it’s all about the patient,” she says. “Some of our patients have scheduled surgeries, but for most it’s an unscheduled hospital visit, which is very frightening. They trust us with their lives and they deserve the very best care when they come to us. Having been on the other side with my cousin when I was 19, I understand.”
Memorial Hermann-TMC has achieved American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) Magnet® recognition.