

## **A Chapter Ends, Another Begins**

Nancy Elliott-Carter, RN, has enjoyed a varied 35-year nursing career - all at the same facility

Christine McLaughlin

Vol. 10 ~ Issue 27 ~ Page 12  
In the Spotlight

It's a bittersweet time for Nancy Elliott-Carter, RN, acting nurse recruiter at Coatesville VA Medical Center in Coatesville, PA. This January, she'll end her days as a full-time nurse to start a new chapter in her life.

However, retiring for this nurse will be an adjustment. Elliott-Carter has spent every year of her 35-year-long career at Coatesville VA Medical Center.

## **Beginning as a Nursing Student**

She first became acquainted with the Coatesville facility while doing her psychiatry rotation as a nursing student. She joined as a staff nurse in acute psychiatry in 1973, taking care of many patients just returning from Vietnam. "I remember having the rooms prepared for POWs who were expected to be released after the war ended," she told *ADVANCE*.

From staff nursing, she moved into management, managing units such as acute psychiatry and substance abuse treatment.

Among her toughest jobs at the medical center was the unit manager position. "It was challenging simply because it is middle management - you're supervising a large number of employees and you're accountable to your managers who have many expectations of you," she said. "It was the most difficult place [for me] to be... You have a lot of responsibility but not necessarily a lot of authority."

## **Career Highs**

Her favorite role was program director of the substance abuse treatment unit. This is where she felt she made the most impact on patients, many of whom were homeless. Plus, it was "a really exciting time to be in the field" because research on medications to treat substance abuse was expanding. "When I first started, there were Alcoholics Anonymous and 12-step groups, and not a lot of evidence-based practice. But now there is," she said.

Elliott-Carter was involved with a research project that examined whether a newer medication, buprenorphine, would likely be abused.

The outcome was favorable for patients; the medication has been a success.

"Buprenorphine has helped so many people. Now people addicted to opiates can return to work and their lifestyle [with only a prescription]. Prior to that, there was methadone which required people to go to clinics every day to get their medication," said Elliott-Carter.

## Choosing the Bedside

After working in management for many years Elliott-Carter wanted to return to patient care. "That's one of the great benefits of working with the VA. You can work with one employer, never get bored and always be challenged because there are so many different opportunities for nurses," she said.

Being a government employee has afforded Elliott-Carter "fantastic" benefits, she said, including 5 weeks vacation the first year, as well as tuition reimbursement, a solid retirement plan and many educational opportunities. And because she's a government employee, she can transfer to another VA anywhere and retain her seniority and benefits.

"We don't have a lot of problems recruiting because of the benefits," said Elliott-Carter who became acting nurse recruiter 6 months ago to cover for a recruiter deployed to Iraq.

## What Inspires Her

However, despite the benefits, it's the patients who've kept Elliott-Carter going all these years. "We all think of [working at the VA medical center] as a mission that has value," she emphasized. "We're caring for America's heroes."

The faces of those heroes have changed since she first started working at the VA, Elliott-Carter said. "When I started, I treated a few WWII WACs, now women are doing so many different jobs in the military. We're seeing many more in the VA," she said.

Another significant change she's noticed is the quality of medications used to help patients with mental illness. Now most patients are treated as outpatients because medications have improved dramatically; they don't have to be admitted to the medical center.

## Lessons Learned

Elliott-Carter said she has learned one thing from her lifetime experience as a nurse - to be thankful for everything in her life. "I have a sign on my door that says: 'Gratitude is the best therapy.' I've found that to be true in almost every situation," she said.

Based on Elliott-Carter's retirement plans, apparently nursing is in her blood and hard to leave. She plans on caring for her grandchildren, helping her father on his farm and doing some per diem work in her spare time. "I don't separate it - being a nurse and being at home. There's no such thing for me as being off duty," she said, smiling.

Christine McLaughlin is a freelance writer, editor and author.