



## Care Behind Bars: We Care

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By Chia-Chen Lee, FNP

LITTLE GIRLS OFTEN SAY, "When I grow up, I want to be a nurse." But very seldom do you hear them say they want to work in a jail when they became a nurse. Correctional nursing is somewhat of a mystery in the world of medicine. However, regardless of where we practice, we in the health care profession all share a common goal, which is to provide the best care for our patients.

Behind the bars in Juvenile Hall is an ideal place to promote preventive medicine. We see kids without a stable home life, minors with asthma sniffing cocaine or methamphetamine, others with diabetes getting high on PCP without eating for days, heroin IV abusers, heroin addicted children, and homeless teens without any knowledge of contraceptives.

All are "nursing opportunities." Can a nurse find a better place to provide health education than Juvenile Hall?

How about the girl whose boyfriend "promised" he would not get her pregnant, but had two abortions; the asthmatic wondering why he or she could not run for a mile, the diabetic girl who eats a whole chocolate cake during "out-time," or the girl whose Sexually Transmitted Disease tests are always positive at each booking?

The medical clinic in Santa Clara County's Juvenile Hall organized 10 educational committees three years ago. Nurses selected an area of interest and educated themselves to become resource persons in that area.

The American Lung Association helped us, and three nurses were certified as smoking cessation trainers. Two other nurses shadowed a Valley Medical Center pediatric diabetic educator to learn more about teaching diabetic children.

A nurse practitioner from a pediatric asthma clinic trained us to use an office-based lung function laptop test, the "Ko Ko spirometer." We use it to demonstrate improved lung function after smoking cessation.

Nurses spent days in the OB/GYN clinic, learning about teen pregnancy. Planned Parenthood helped establish and coordinate follow up care. Our nurses attended childhood obesity conferences in San Francisco, a diabetic conference at the San Jose Convention Center, and fetal alcohol syndrome classes.

On the day a minor arrives, we initiate a procedure for assessing and addressing their health education needs. For example, anyone with a family history of diabetes is referred to the diabetic committee. Kids who are overweight or have high BMI are signed up for childhood obesity prevention and nutrition classes.

Asthmatics are tested for lung function via the Ko Ko spirometer. Smokers are offered smoking cessation classes. Girls with positive pregnancy tests are evaluated and counseled. San Francisco State University and San Jose State University nursing students

contribute by conducting a section of health education as part of their curriculum requirements.

In the clinic's waiting area we play short DVDs about STD prevention, dating safety, HIV prevention and safer sex. The once boring waiting room became an educational corner. Models displaying the visible signs of STDs attract curious eyes, and that curiosity opens up opportunities for health education.

The kids in turn open up, revealing their needs to the nurses. Why a girl stays in an abusive relationship, how she struggled with low self-esteem on the one hand and the craving for love and attention on the other hand. Why the girl usually doesn't have any support system, or a place to verbalize her concerns. What's wrong when a boyfriend punches you, or when you grow up where your father hits your mother almost daily, where your aunt has bruises every other week.

How can such a girl understand dating violence? How do we teach a gang affiliated boy not to use dirty needles when all his male relatives have multiple tattoos and share needles for IV heroin? How can a 15 year-old pregnant girl understand the risk of teen pregnancy when her mother and grandmothers all had children during their teens? How can a diabetic girl go home, bake a chocolate cake and finish off the whole cake by herself? Why does she feel that when her single mother goes out for housekeeping work, eating is the only way she is in control?

It is an amazing experience to listen and share knowledge with the kids. When a diabetic child learns to self inject insulin correctly, an asthmatic is able to demonstrate a correct method of using an inhaler, a pregnant girl shows you the various foods which are rich in folic acid, a teenager tells of the importance of eating high calcium food, a boy with tattoos advises his peers how to avoid IV drugs in preventing HIV/hepatitis C, when a diabetic boy loses 32 pounds - we jump up and down with joy.

A nurse could not dream of any better reward than the success of the kids. We reach them with various games that are not only educational, but also fun. We throw a condom on the desk with wax for lubrication and ask them what is wrong when they laugh. Girls enjoy a game we devised called "choices for life." They exchange their own stories about making choices.

We play "cup sex" with the kids in demonstrating how STDs spread without obvious signs. A touching moment occurred when a girl told how she got into prostitution because of drug addiction.

What is the definition of home for one who never experienced a home in her life? A girl told of bouncing between 23 foster homes in five years. Her beautiful innocent eyes were seeking approval as she claimed she would come back to Juvenile Hall next year to assist with decorating the clinic for the holidays! "I know how to come back to Juvenile Hall; it is so easy." It is sad when kids ask if they can stay in the Juvenile Hall even though they have served their time, because they feel a sense of belonging.

Kids growing up in the world of TV commercials have a false sense that any medical problem can be resolved with a pill. Compounding that with their low self esteem, they can easily get hooked on medication.

Juvenile Hall's pill call carts even have a poster which reads, "Do you have a dream? Ask your nurse." The nurse tries to help them set up short and long-term goals.

A "Bear to Dream" project was born with the assistance of Valley Medical Center foundation grant. Juveniles who set up their goal for life are given a "build a bear" kit; they keep their life goal message inside the stuffed animal. The bear is given to them upon release. They can open the bear at home or open it later in life. Some of the messages simply read, "What lesson did I learn when I was a troubled teen?" A simple message like this can refocus them, and put their life in perspective.

Life is never without problems in Juvenile Hall, but the nurses always make it a priority that each child who goes through the clinic leaves with a better understanding of how to care for themselves and their health. Whether it is a high protein diet, a correct way of wearing a condom, a needle exchange program, safe sex education, relaxation techniques, safe dating tips, changing diapers for a new born, a smoke cessation class, the proper way to control blood sugar, or the correct way of using inhalers, we are committed to making a difference. They are our future and our hope.

Nurses are not here to judge what is right or what is wrong. We believe everyone has the potential to learn and change. Our mission is clear. We are here to provide our patients with the best health care and training possible, and we do it because we care.

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