

Meet Ontario's new provincial chief nursing officer

NURSE-LED RESEARCH WILL TRANSFORM PATIENT CARE, SAYS DEBRA BOURNES.

DEBRA BOURNES ADMITS THAT during her years as a nursing student she wasn't very interested in nursing research. She remembers reading articles and thinking they were *dry* and not very useful to her practice. That changed when she began her master's studies in the late '90s, embarking on her own research.

She remembers one study in particular. She interviewed the families of critical care patients as they waited for news on their loved one. She gathered stories that generated discussion among colleagues, and that ultimately led to a decision to improve communication with families in hospital waiting rooms.

"I suddenly realized that I was passionate about hearing peoples' perspectives, and that when the findings from my studies were shared with other nurses, it often made them stop and think about similar situations differently," Bournes says. "This study was the first that made me realize the power of evidence in practice."

The Oakville native, who has since achieved her PhD, says nursing research will play a big part in her new role as Ontario's Provincial Chief Nursing Officer (PCNO). Her job is to provide strategic advice to government on health and public policy issues from a nursing perspective.

Although the word research may conjure up the image

of a nurse far removed from the front line of health care, Bournes doesn't see it that way. She says research provides an opportunity to think about our systems, processes and relationships, and how we can improve them in a way that has a positive impact on patient care. And that research doesn't have to be dry, she explains.



Three things you don't know about Debra Bournes:

1. She was a lifeguard and competitive synchronized swimmer in high school.
2. She loves to spoil her nieces and nephew.
3. She rarely cooks, unless it's something she can easily re-heat.

In fact, Bournes recalls another Aha! moment in her career that illustrates her point. It came after she watched a play called *Handle with Care*, which is based on research findings about women's experiences living with breast cancer. "When I saw it, I was shocked at how meaningful it was and I knew that I would never forget the messages that it portrayed," she explains. Another show that struck a chord was *I'm Still Here*, a play

based on research about what it's like to live with dementia.

Before taking on her new role at Queen's Park four months ago, Bournes spent more than eight years in a research and leadership role at Toronto's University Health Network (UHN). It was there she challenged nurses to be involved in research and to create evidence

that would help change the system and nursing practice. "Staff nurses are underutilized," she suggests. "We don't expect them to do (research), but when you give them the tools and support, they can do amazing things."

To engage front-line staff, Bournes developed UHN's Research Challenge, where teams of nurses identify a problem in their organization and conduct research to help fix it.

She recalls one group that wanted to address last-minute surgery cancellations. Uncomfortable delivering bad news, the nurses decided there must be a better way. They spoke to patients and families and discovered some had turned their lives upside down to have surgery. A new process for cancellation and rebooking was created. Today, patients are aware of possible cancellation, and are given a new appointment time if they need to return. They aren't left wondering what happens next.

"Nurses know where the holes are in the health system, because they plug them every day," Bournes says. That's why as PCNO, she wants to focus on professional development and giving nurses time to research and to participate on committees to share their knowledge. When nurses are supported, the work environment improves; turnover

decreases; sick time drops and care improves, she says.

Since becoming PCNO, Bournes has focused on getting to know the different nursing stakeholders, so she can work to harness their ideas. She continues to draw on her research skills to provide better patient care, but now she's tackling it from a higher vantage point. **RN**

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