

From patient to educator

A TWO-WEEK HOSPITAL STAY FOR DIABETES INTRODUCES A YOUNG SANDI DENNISON TO NURSING, AND HER FUTURE CAREER.

SANDI DENNISON WAS 10-YEARS-OLD when her parents noticed she began making frequent trips to the bathroom. The youngster's energy also plummeted. Once able to swim laps, Dennison could barely make it to the other end of the pool during lessons, causing her to cry in frustration.

Her symptoms peaked on the May long weekend in 1963, just as the family was preparing for a trip to their new cottage. Dennison's parents thought she had a kidney infection because she was emptying her bladder every hour. The vacation was cancelled, and she was whisked to the hospital, where she was admitted for two weeks. Doctors discovered high levels of sugar in her urine. Dennison was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes.

During her 14-day stay, Dennison learned how to administer insulin by practising on an orange. Her cousin was a nurse on the floor, and Dennison remembers following her relative and watching other RNs. To keep busy, the self-described bookworm pored over novels from the *Cherry Ames*, *Student Nurse* mystery series. It was during this hospital stay that the young girl decided she wanted to become a nurse.

Upon learning of his daughter's dream, Dennison's father wrote Windsor's Grace Hospital School of Nursing to find out if this career path was feasible. "As long as (the disease) was well-controlled, there was no reason that I couldn't

(become an RN)," Dennison says of the response. She graduated from the University of Windsor in 1975.

A 13-week school placement with the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) pushed Dennison towards home and community care. It wasn't her first choice – she had a passion



Three things you don't know about Sandi Dennison:

1. She likes to travel. New York City was her last adventure.
2. Her pets include a black lab and three cats.
3. She enjoys reading science fiction and murder mystery novels.

for pediatrics – but it was an experience that helped her to realize she liked being a "jack-of-all-trades" in the community. For 24 years, she worked for VON, helping with bathing, catheters, dressings and B12 injections, among other things.

She admits working with diabetes was sometimes a struggle, especially when it came to slotting in time to eat and inject insulin. She gradually developed a routine, but the process wasn't without challenges. In 1985, Dennison passed out behind the wheel

on her way to a home-care visit. Without warning, her blood sugar had dropped.

There were no injuries in the head-on collision, but Dennison was shaken. She became more diligent about tracking her blood sugars, and started using a different type of insulin.

Today, Dennison works as

VON. "I thought I was pretty well-versed in diabetes," she says. But when she was hired, she realized: "I hardly knew anything about diabetes," including information about medications and the differences between Type 1 and 2. That steep learning curve was only made more difficult by the size of the centre's diabetes program. At the time, it was new and staffed by two nurses and two dieticians.

The four have put together a series of classes and support groups. Dennison joined RNAO's Diabetes Nursing Interest Group (DNIG) to continue to build her knowledge of the chronic disease. In 2007, she assumed the role of chair, a position she holds to this day.

Dennison has always used her own experiences with diabetes as a teaching opportunity. "It's not anything I've hidden or (been) ashamed of," she says. She will continue to draw on those experiences to enlighten others. "It's very easy to forget or not be aware of the distress that people feel with diabetes," she says in response to recent statistics regarding stigma. "We need to be mindful of that distress and help people work through it." **RN**

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To find out more about the stigma of diabetes, visit www.RNAO.ca/diabetes for news on the latest global research.