

BULLETIN

Reaching out to future health science professionals

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by SUSANNE SHAW



recurring theme among HSAs health science professionals who are pressed for time at work but who want to encourage new recruits into the professions to help ease the workload is that they just dont have the time to mentor students.

To encourage -the best and the brightest to come work for us," providence Health Care social worker Sylvia Lai and colleagues started an internship program at St. Pauls Hospital in vancouver to enhance the practical application of hospital social work.

Before the program was in place, teaching recruits meant onerous workloads for staff. Consequently, the training often fell short, leaving new social workers ill-equipped to manage -a 22-bed unit where death, crisis and loss are day-to-day events," Lai said.

Today, the school of social work at UBC is raising students knowledge base, and under the St. pauls internship program, practicums are better organized.

In their first year, students rotate through five key areas of the hospital to hone basic skills. The following year, they choose specialty areas to solidify these skills to better prepare them for the challenges of hospital social work.

Social work can be stressful, Lai said, but she is passionate about helping patients and knows that there is a wealth of young social workers who have the same passion to offer.

Sylvia Lai
Social Worker
St. Paul's Hospital

Lai works in the chronic illness field. Her profession covers a broad spectrum of services, from crisis intervention to arranging support for patients leaving hospital. mainly, she counsels and collaborates with patients and their families ... advocating on their behalf and shar-ing valuable information and resources.

Understanding how chronic disease or traumatic injuries affect peoples ability to care for their families, Lai

strives to alleviate those effects by arranging available community support services for them. Social work, she said, is "integral in acute care hospitals." Effective social work also helps the bottom line, as proper discharge planning allows the development of adequate community supports to make it possible for patients to leave the hospital in a timely manner and prevent unnecessary readmissions to hospital.

But the process of continuing care is at risk with staff cuts and the continuing shortage of health science professionals, including social workers.

Lai is doing her part to help with recruitment and training of new health professionals, and recognizes the need for improved awareness of social workers' contribution to the health care team. "We work shoulder to shoulder with nurses, doctors, pharmacists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and others," Lai explains, "and we need to be able to demonstrate what our role is, and how we contribute."

When a health services teacher approached her to speak to her high school students about her work, Lai proposed that the students visit her at the hospital instead. The teacher agreed, so more than 20 students from Vancouver Technical High School toured the hospital, met a panel of health professionals, and opened their eyes to the varied career possibilities in hospitals.

Lai is an excellent example for those students. Over the past decade, she has accumulated a wealth of skills and knowledge to assist critically ill patients who are often terrified. Her friendly demeanor calms and reassures them. Lai is driven to help her patients, regardless of their lifestyle, their finances, or other circumstances. She works with patients, their families and support networks to salvage what can be saved, easing the situation for all concerned. Her equanimity is admirable, considering she generally sees people at their worst, and at their most desperate.

Her compassion stems from her experiences growing up as a visible minority in Vancouver in the 60s and 70s when racism towards minorities was more transparent. Her mother set the example of advocacy and compassion as she used her strong grasp of English to help other new Chinese Canadians negotiate health care, immigration, and other systems.

"That sense of right and wrong and advocacy was something I grasped pretty early on, and those very Chinese values of respecting your elders, honouring the family, education and strong work ethic, also formed my general world view."

Lai's road to social work was a winding one. Originally, she studied nursing, and graduated from UBC in 1990 ... preparing her well for health care in general. While she was a psychiatric nurse at Toronto East General Hospital, Lai discovered the role of social work stretched beyond patients' illnesses to embrace their needs, hopes and families.

She returned to UBC and enrolled in back-to-back BSW and MSW studies in Social work, graduating in 2001.

While earning her social work degrees, she worked for the Ministry for Children and Families in child protection and at BC Children's Hospital. In 1994 she joined St. Paul's Hospital. St. Paul's is a team-playing hospital where everyone has a vital role to play, she said. It is big enough to be exciting, but small enough so as to know everybody. Her biggest reward is knowing she made a difference in someone's life, even if that person doesn't realize it.

Lai gives to the community what her parents gave to her. They immigrated to Canada to give her opportunities they never had. "They worked hard every day of their lives," she recalled. "I look back and realize how fortunate we were that our parents remained healthy and could provide for us all those years. My father also worked in a union environment; when I look back, I realize what a difference it made to our family to have the support and security this provided."

Lai greatly appreciates her husband's "incredible" support and they treasure their life with their daughter Olivia and son Matthew. When her kids grow up, she hopes to branch out to international aid work. "We owe it to our children and their future to reach out and help ensure that basic needs of shelter, safety and education are available to everybody." ❌

Do you have a remarkable colleague? Submit their name and a brief description of why you think their story would interest and inspire other HSA members across BC. Send your nomination to yukie@hsabc.org.

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