

# Certification Spotlight

## Correctional Nursing: A Newfound Perspective

By La Toya S. Jackson



If you had asked Norma Evans, RN, BSN, and site manager for the Mississippi State Penitentiary Hospital 10 years ago where she would see herself, correctional nursing would not have been an answer. Now that she has been a part of the correctional family, her outlook has changed tremendously. Correctional nursing has not only had a great impact on her life and career but it has also enabled her to gain a better understanding of what it takes to work in a correctional setting.

Evans has been in the nursing profession for 30 years. She dedicated 11 years to hospital-based nursing, 10 years to home health nursing and her recent years to correctional nursing. She has worked in every aspect of nursing ranging from pediatrics, medical/surgical and obstetrics. Evans received her Bachelor of Science in nursing from Delta State University. "My background in home health and medical/surgery better prepared me for this job," Evans said. In addition to her educational and clinical background, Evans credits her mother for encouraging her to become a nurse. "My mother was a home health patient and the nurse that was taking care of her encouraged me, as well, to pursue a career in nursing," she said. Norma is now currently certified in correctional nursing through the American Correctional Association.

Evans did not consider working in corrections until the year 2000 when she accepted a position as an agency nurse assigned to the Mississippi Department of Corrections in Parchman, Miss. "As the cell doors closed behind me, I had no idea what I was getting myself into," said Evans. During her brave walk upstairs to the Inpatient Department of the

Correctional Hospital and her walk down the halls, Evans realized that the setting was no different than that of a "free world" hospital. "They were still patients who had ailments and needed treatment just like the patients I had previously worked with," Evans said. This was a new start that would eventually lead to her new certification in correctional nursing.

"It's a typical Monday through Friday job that has one putting out fires when you walk through the door," Evans said. It requires one to be alert and always aware of his or her surroundings. The hospital's medical coverage is operational on three shifts, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Wexford Health Sources Inc., based in Pittsburgh, is the contracted company that provides the medical coverage for the Mississippi Department of Corrections. Wexford Health staff also provide dental, mental health, laboratory, X-ray, tuberculosis/infection control and physical therapy services. Because of Wexford Health, Norma was made aware of ACA certification and was strongly encouraged to become certified.

In addition to being the hospital site manager for the Mississippi State Penitentiary, Evans is also the director of nursing. Her responsibilities include supervising all nurses, overseeing various clinics and monitoring county regional facility nurses within her range.

Becoming certified as a correctional nurse manager was not just another task for Evans. It meant being a part of something much bigger. "I became certified because anything I'm a part of, I want to be the best," Evans said. She learned the laws related to offenders' rights, the history of correctional nurses, and

how to better work with security staff and offenders and the expectations from both sides. "I learned more about management of staff in corrections and how to be an effective manager and leader," she stated. In this profession, one has to be a mediator between the officers, medical staff and the offenders.

Studying for certification as a correctional nurse manager allowed Evans to become more aware of the rationale behind each ACA standard and to understand how the different laws regarding managing a correctional institution came about.

"Becoming certified is demanding and is not something that should be approached lightly; however, it has given me peace of mind in knowing and understanding my job. It's not wise to assume that just because you think you know the standards, that you are OK," Evans said. "You are taught laws, regulations and how to handle situations as they arise. It teaches you to learn and remember that safety and security come first."

Certification is important because it demonstrates that one is an expert in the field. It helps corrections professionals to perform their jobs better and to understand the "why" of a job or its duties. "I would definitely encourage becoming certified in correctional nursing. It is very rewarding," Evans said.

*La Toya S. Jackson is medical records supervisor for Wexford Health Sources Inc., at the Mississippi State Penitentiary.*