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# CAMP VERDE BUGLE

11/1/2014 1:59:00 PM

## Camp Verde nurse finds a calling in correctional healthcare

By Chelsea Gielarowski

Armed with courage and the drive to trigger positive changes in their patients' lives, correctional nurses overcome challenges other nurses rarely encounter. Each day brings a new experience and each patient brings a different reward.

Registered Nurse Christopher Mattson, nursing supervisor at the Yavapai County Sheriff's Office jail in Camp Verde, is a perfect example. On a daily basis he works with mentally and physically ill underprivileged patients, many of whom never received regular health care before entering the criminal justice system. Talking to Mattson, his dedication to helping others immediately shines through. It is evident that his main goal is to make a difference in the lives of his patients.

### Why Corrections?

Correctional health care is a growing industry, with sentencing and admission rates on the rise. According to the Federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, at the end of last year U.S. state and federal correctional systems held more than 1.5 million prisoners. And based on our court system's interpretation of the U.S. Constitution, each one of these inmates is guaranteed necessary health services.

Mattson confirms that correctional nurses care deeply about their patients. In the traditional hospital setting, nurses do not always get the chance to watch their patients' growth and progress. But correctional nurses meet their patients at the time they enter the jail and participate in creating and delivering each patient's care plan from Day One.

He points out correctional nurses play a huge role in their patients' healing process and get to watch the improvement firsthand. Witnessing a patient's complete turnaround is one of the career's greatest rewards. Mattson adds, "In correctional health care, you can manage expectations even when the odds are against you."

Mattson could have had his choice of jobs. A nurse for more than 28 years, he has had many medical practices and hospitals approach him about leaving the Jail. But his heart keeps him in corrections.

He enjoys the constant ability to gain more knowledge and further his nursing career. "There is so much opportunity to succeed and develop in corrections and I have always been one to never settle but to grow." He believes correctional health care is a great learning experience, even for new graduates, "There are so many different types of illnesses we see, so you get a little bit of everything. That alone expands your health care

knowledge, making you a stronger and more prepared nurse."

And as Mattson points out, correctional health care is exciting, too. "A correctional nurse doubles as a detective," he says. When a new patient comes in, the Jail nurses must ascertain the inmate's symptoms, formulate an initial diagnosis, and determine if anything in the patient's past could have affected his present health.

The Arizona correctional health care industry has noticed and rewarded Mattson's talent and dedication. He has won many nursing awards including his most recent: being selected as the 2014 Mary Hynek Medical Staff of the Year. This award is given each year by the Arizona Detention Association, to recognize one correctional health care worker in the state for his or her outstanding achievements and performance.

### Is It Safe?

Mattson has worked in correctional health care since he accepted a position at the Yavapai County Jail seven years ago with Wexford Health Sources, the County's contracted inmate medical services provider. Almost half of the U.S. states and many counties subcontract their inmate health care to private companies or academic institutions that specialize in the field.

Mattson recalls being eager to start his new job, while also experiencing some uncertainty. He was not sure what to expect when he walked into the jail that first day. But the warm greeting he received from the doctors, nurses, mental health professionals, and administrative staff on Wexford Health's clinical team put him at ease and calmed his nerves.

Of course, security also plays a large role in correctional health care. Mattson is completely comfortable working in a correctional environment due to the constant supervision. Clinical staff members are never alone with inmate patients. He lightheartedly says, "Who else can say they get a police escort just to make a house call?"

Most nurses are not familiar with correctional health care as a career option and getting over the initial nervousness can be tough. Key advice for someone considering correctional health care as a career is to keep an open mind and remain non-judgmental. As Mattson can attest, being considerate and consistent has earned him the respect and gratitude of his inmate patients.

### The Bottom Line

While correctional nurses must be well-rounded generalists, they also have to care for patients who require unique specialty services. During the course of a workday, a jail nurse can encounter patients with health issues ranging from cancer to diabetes to mental illness. In all of these cases, a correctional nurse must exhibit critical thinking, a cool head under pressure, and strong patient assessment skills.

Given the wide variety of health care issues, acuity levels, and patients found among the inmate population, correctional nurses must also be flexible and maintain open minds. Adaptability-not only with patients and other clinicians, but also with facility security and administrative staff-is vital to success in such a diverse environment.

Mattson encourages nurses not to be apprehensive about working in corrections. If the field interests you but you have concerns about working with inmates, he recommends thinking

about the reasons you became a nurse. "If it was to help those who can't help themselves, and you want to change their lives, then corrections is for you."

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