

# Jail Nursing

It wasn't easy for Susan Spangler, M.N., R.N., F.N.P., assistant professor at the OHSU School of Nursing La Grande campus, to get used to working at Union County's jail. Clanging doors, grim surroundings, loud echoes, hallways where the doors behind you lock before the next set opens. No wonder medical practitioners were afraid of jails, she thought. "It was unnerving, to tell you the truth," she said.

But in the eight years since her initial visit, Spangler has overseen a successful partnership between the 36-bed jail in La Grande and the School of Nursing. The School of Nursing's La Grande campus provides a part-time registered nurse on site, a nurse practitioner who visits four to six hours a week, and an on-call system that guarantees jail officials around-the-clock access to a health care provider.

The contract is an example of the school's emphasis on practice-driven nursing. It is also representative of the school's interest in providing real-world opportunities for students and to collaborate with partners to fill community needs. Jail officials say they've benefited from the expertise, 24-hour access and stability that OHSU has provided.

## On-Site Care for Inmates

Clinical instructor Ginny Holt, B.S.N., R.N., is in her third year as the jail's part-time nurse. Her small quarters near the control room are furnished with a desk, file cabinets, exam table, sink and scale. The jail population hovers around 32 and is constantly in flux – nearly 2,000 people are booked each year. Holt usually receives about 20 visits a week from inmates who have filled out a confidential information form to request an appointment.

The people Holt treats have been accused of crimes that run the gamut from petty theft to drunk driving to homicide. About 90 percent of the inmates are male, many between the ages of 18 and 25. Alcohol and drug abuse is common, and the recidivism rate is high.

In a typical day, Holt might dispense medication, hear complaints of aches and pains, administer sexually transmitted disease tests, listen to inmates with situational anxieties and make a call to Spangler or the on-call nurse practitioner for advice on more complex matters. Occasionally she contends with minor traumas, which include lacerations from a scuffle or a busted hand from punching a wall.

Holt says her work is in many ways an extension of her

## La Grande Campus Faculty Manage Inmate Care

By Dan Sadowsky

*This article was written prior to the March 5th death of Susan Spangler. The School of Nursing will miss the heartfelt commitment Susan brought to her work as is evidenced in this article. Our thoughts go to Susan's family who has chosen to celebrate her devotion to nursing by establishing the Susan E. Spangler Nursing Scholarship Fund. Those who wish to honor Susan through a gift to this scholarship may contact Barbara Peschiera at 503 494-7525.*



previous job in Union County's public health department. "I try to do a lot of prevention and teaching," she says. "Some inmates don't know much about health, especially mental health, where there's a strong stigma attached."

Spangler's involvement as the nurse practitioner expands the scope of health care OHSU can offer. She visits the jail at least one morning a week, during which time she might evaluate an inmate's asthma (prevalent in people who have smoked methamphetamine and used other drugs, and exacerbated by anxiety and poor air quality). She may also determine the severity of an inmate's skin rash, which sometimes occur from the combination of wool blankets and harsh soap. She'll hear complaints of stomach discomfort, insomnia, possible STD symptoms and "pains of unknown origin." In a confined area with a changing population, Spangler adds, it's important to do an examination thorough enough to rule out infectious diseases like tuberculosis, head lice and other infections.

Ginny Elder, M.N., F.N.P., clinical director of the Elgin Family Health Center and one of the jail's weekend on-call nurse practitioners, says the job also involves piecing together the medical history of a new inmate by tracking down past providers, hospitals or correctional facilities. "There are a lot of inmates who come in without their medications but say they're on a certain drug," she says. "We want to make sure it's a legitimate problem, but also to get them what they genuinely need."

### **Roots of a Partnership**

The jail's nursing arrangement is an example of one of several practice-driven nursing efforts initiated by school and Union County officials. The School of Nursing's La Grande campus is involved in delivering health care services through its nurse practitioner clinics in Union, Elgin and Eastern Oregon University student health centers, and the Health Network for Rural Schools in Cove, Elgin, Imbler, North Powder and Union.

"We're involved in a series of community health care efforts to meet the direct needs of the population, as requested by the county," says Marna Flaherty-Robb, M.S., R.N., C.N.S., associate dean for practice development and integration. Providing services at the jail, she explains, helps OHSU fulfill its mission by filling a community need, serving a medically underserved population, and providing a venue

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*—Susan Spangler, M.N., R.N., F.N.P.*

for student experiences.

Back in 1995 when the school offered to provide health services to the jail, officials at the La Grande campus were keen on developing community ties. “We were isolated to some extent,” recalls Spangler. “It was not well-known that OHSU School of Nursing had a campus in La Grande. At the time we thought one thing we could do was try to make connections in the community.”

The jail’s longtime nurse and on-call doctor were both retiring, and the county was looking for new providers. Dana Wright, a Union County undersheriff and the jail’s manager, says the school showed “the greatest interest” in filling both roles with a nurse and a nurse practitioner.

### First Impressions and Innovative Perspectives

“From my position as director of a small rural health clinic, I look at the jail population as part of the community. These are community members who are now in jail. They could just as easily be someone I see in the clinic today or tomorrow, but they’re going through a more stressful time in their lives. It’s an opportunity to help them focus more positively on their well-being, because in many ways they don’t have much else to focus on but themselves and how they’re feeling.”

— Ginny Elder, M.N., F.N.P., clinical director, Elgin Family Health Clinic and on-call nurse practitioner for the jail for eight years

“The inmates don’t see the nurse as part of the corrections staff. She’s a neutral party, and inmates can visit her and talk about their physical health problems or mental health problems and feel comfortable with confidentiality. I’ve not seen the tension between staff and inmates as I saw before Ginny increased her hours to handle mental health. It’s been considerably helpful. Having inmates visit her when they see crisis in their personal lives is beneficial to the jail officers, who don’t always have the tools to manage that.”

— Dana Wright, manager, Union County Jail

He calls the resulting partnership “phenomenal.” The health care needs of his inmates have been effectively and efficiently managed, the relationship between jail officials and OHSU nurses has been excellent, and there’s been little turnover among nursing staff. What’s more, he adds, the ability of his staff to contact a medical professional at any time, day or night, has reduced costly emergency-room visits and relieved the stress of making after-hours medical judgments that they were not trained to handle.

### Service Expands to Mental Health

Holt says the staff is “supremely supportive” of her and other OHSU clinicians. During her tenure jail officials have agreed to several medical-related requests by OHSU nurses, most notably an appeal two years ago to augment the nurse’s 20-hour-a-week schedule to include four hours devoted to mental health issues.

After about a year in her position, Holt noticed an increase in people with mental-health complaints showing up in her office. Elder, too, noted that many inmates complained of physical pain only so they could receive authorization to visit the jail nurse. Once in the office, it became clear “they just needed someone to talk to.” A staff member with the county’s mental health department visited the jail once a week. But the county’s expertise lies in crisis intervention, not the more common situational anxiety exhibited by inmates. All agreed that mental health concerns would be better addressed by the OHSU nurses on site.

Some inmates enter jail with previous mental-health diagnoses such as bipolar disorder. But many inmates experience situational anxiety – stress triggered by their incarceration. Holt figures she now spends nearly half her time helping inmates cope with the mental strains related to life behind bars. “If I see someone who is depressed beyond a situational depression and I think medications might make a difference,” she adds, “I refer them to Susan.”

Wright says the extra four hours each week has made a difference in lessening tension in the jail, and Spangler counts fewer patients treated for fighting or self-inflicted injuries. Both say the changes demonstrate that Holt has won the respect of inmates, who treat her as a neutral party who won’t betray their confidentiality (unless, Holt says, she hears information that puts the inmate or others at risk). “A lot of inmates just want to vent,” Spangler explains,



Ann Reiner

## Changing the Face of Cancer in the 21st Century

Ann Reiner, M.N., R.N., O.C.N., has a life story that reads as though she never sleeps. Program director for cancer services at the OHSU Cancer Institute, Reiner guided the idea of a joint Tuality/OHSU Cancer Center from conception through fruition. She brokered an agreement with Legacy for a collaborative clinical blood and bone marrow transplant program. She's active in the Oncology Nursing Society and has served on the organization's national board and leadership development team. She sat on institutional review boards for more than 20 years, and volunteered the last seven years for the local Komen Race for the Cure, single-handedly putting together the first-aid team. Last year Reiner was voted one of Komen's Local Heroes. Meanwhile, she mothers an adolescent and, at 50, is pursuing a Ph.D in oncology nursing.

Reiner's hands reach across the nation but her goal is single-minded. "Cancer is a disease of the whole person," she insists,

"body, mind and spirit. We need to create a milieu where people address more than just the disease—where treating symptoms and how cancer affects lives is just as important as treating the disease itself."

Reiner is determined to attack the expected doubling of cancer incidence by 2050. Since cancer symptom management affects the over-65 age group differently from others, this is the budding area she's determined to research, unlock, and educate nurses about.

"It's my mission to help a person manage the physical and psychosocial components of the disease," she says. "When a nurse addresses all these and provides evidence-based care, the patient finds a new balance, managing their life the way they want, being true to who they are. That is what nursing is all about."

By Diane Solomon

"and they can't talk about certain things with their cellmate, like how a childhood trauma may be affecting them. With Ginny they can process it in a way that's safer.

### Jail Nursing: Challenges and Rewards

One topic Holt and other OHSU clinicians try to avoid is the inmate's legal predicament or criminal past, unless it is directly related to their physical or mental problems. The nurses also say they put aside any feelings about what people have done to get themselves locked away. "They may have problems or lifestyles that turn me off," says Spangler, "but that doesn't get in the way of providing treatment."

Still, Spangler and other OHSU nurses say working with inmates is a challenge. Many are repeat offenders constantly battling drug and alcohol abuse and poor self-esteem. "Meth use is overwhelming," says Holt. "There are so many people who use it, and it's just devastating to see."

Sherry Blakely, who worked as the jail nurse for more than five years, saw a "revolving door" of inmates, something she figures is not atypical of a small, rural community. "What got me was seeing the same people over and over and over," she says. "A lot of them are the second or third generation to get caught in a vicious cycle of abuse and drug use. So many had been personally abused."

Blakely says working in the jail with a variety of personalities improved her communication skills and increased her empathy for both corrections officers and inmates. She often treats former jail clients in her current job as a public health nurse for Union County. Every so often she sees someone who was able to break the cycle of drug and alcohol abuse, including one woman whose poor decisions led to repeated jail time. "She's straightened out her life quite a bit," says Blakely.

For Elder, the experience has reinforced that "there's always more than one side to a story" and shown her that the inmates are members of the same community she sees in Elgin or at other clinics, but in a different circumstance.

Holt's greatest reward is advocating good health care for people who probably need it the most, but are the least likely to get it. "Most of these people don't have health insurance, they don't have a doctor," says Holt. "Most of their care comes from the emergency room, so if we can do something here to make them healthier, or think about being healthier when they get out, I think we've done a good job." NP