



"I didn't want to be influenced by their crime, I was just there to provide care for them and do the best I could for them."

Offender Health Care

INTERVIEW WITH SYLVIE-ANN LAVIGNE

While it may be difficult for some to believe, caring for inmates as a nurse at Joyceville Institution was both rewarding and satisfying for Sylvie-Ann Lavigne. Now just three years away from retirement, she looks back on the time she spent delivering health care to inmates.

“The inmates were ordinary people,” she says. “Some of them just had bad luck. Some of them had no chance from day one. Sometimes I would meet an inmate and think ‘Maybe we were shopping at the same grocery store at one time.’ For the most part they were polite and grateful for the care they were receiving.”

Sylvie-Ann started working at the Regional Treatment Centre in the Ontario Region in 1992, but soon moved over to Joyceville in 1993 on a permanent basis. She spent a decade there until she was asked to come to NHQ. Today she is the Manager of the National Infectious Disease Program within the Health Services Sector.

Working for CSC was never in Sylvie-Ann’s plans, but when nursing jobs were hard to come by in hospitals, a suggestion came at just the right time.

“When I arrived in Kingston, nurses were being let go in hospitals, so it was difficult to find a nursing job. That’s when, through a chance meeting, the opportunity to work for CSC was mentioned. I thought, ‘Why not give it a try?’, even if I had clearly said before that I would never work in a prison.”

Turns out it was a good decision.

“I truly enjoyed working with inmates. What I found is that when you work in a hospital, you are specialized in your field of expertise. What you do can be repetitive, but when I got to the institution, our role was so much broader. I always described it as a mini emergency room or doctor’s office. We had our daily nursing clinic so we knew who we were seeing, why and when, but in the middle of our clinic you could be called to respond to

any type of trauma whether it be a heart attack, blunt injury, or an overdose. Even if your days started in an orderly fashion, they may not have ended that way.”

Providing health care to inmates is legislated through the CCRA. It is a responsibility that CSC takes very seriously, ensuring that it has the best nursing staff working in its institutions. Nurses constitute the largest health professional group employed by CSC, and all services are conducted according to national accreditation standards. The health care system within CSC is a well-oiled machine, and people like Sylvie-Ann are the ones who keep it going.

As Manager of the National Infectious Disease Program, Sylvie-Ann is well aware of the top health issues facing CSC’s nursing staff and inmates today. Take for instance Ebola, which became a world-wide concern and one that had Sylvie-Ann, her colleagues, and other sectors working together to prepare for. That’s the reality of the world we live in today, she says, with international travel being so common. It’s something that keeps her busy, but dealing with infectious diseases is nothing new for her.

“The hot issues when I started were mainly Hepatitis C and Tuberculosis (TB). We had one nurse making sure everyone had their TB assessment done every year. We had a few Hepatitis A and B cases, but not many due in part to the immunization program in the community. The number of HIV cases was again very low. Today we still have those, plus outbreaks of MRSA (Staph), Norovirus, and influenza to name just a few, which we did not see as much then as we do now.”

Over the course of the years CSC has fine-tuned its screening processes and subsequent procedures to ensure that infectious diseases and illnesses are managed properly. If you ask Sylvie-Ann, CSC is a leader in this field.

“I have always thought that CSC has one of the best screening programs around because every inmate coming in is offered the chance to be screened, and many of them



Sylvie-Ann receiving an award from Commissioner Don Head, 2009



Sylvie-Ann's nursing school graduation photo, 1977



accept that opportunity. We have always tested for HIV, Hepatitis, and TB, but nowadays we also offer more testing for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) according to their risk factors, which are determined by a number of questions they are asked upon admission and during incarceration."

She believes in the work that CSC is doing to keep inmates healthy and safe, and has been around to see the progress take place.

"The institutions are getting very efficient at handling outbreaks. They know exactly what to do. They know whom to isolate, when a swab needs to be done, and so on. Whatever it is that presents itself, they can handle it."

