



FROM DOCTORAL PROGRAM TO *Dream Job* SUSAN UTTERBACK, DNP '19

The goal of Dr. Susan Utterback's doctoral project was to decrease the need for opioid medications following cesarean deliveries. What she didn't count on was it transforming her career and making her dream job a reality.

"The result of my project was successfully decreasing postpartum opioid use by 65 percent in our maternal child health ward," said Utterback, a 2019 graduate of the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing's Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program. "The success of the project has opened many doors for me. I was asked to remain in the unit where I oversaw the project and got to create the role of my dreams."

When she initially applied to the DNP program, Utterback was working as a healthcare informatics specialist. By the time she completed her Capstone Project: *Enhanced Recovery for Cesarean Section: A Quality Improvement Project to Reduce Opioid Use (ERAS)*, she had transitioned to a role on Abington-Jefferson Health's leadership team as a nursing systems coordinator in Women and Children's Services at the Pennsylvania institution. In the newly created position, she collaborates with the service line leadership team in identifying and managing projects that enhance the quality of patient care and safety while improving organizational

efficiencies. She also manages the perinatal information systems and facilitates the organization's service line transition to Epic EHR, a state-of-the-science medical records software platform.

In the process, she's continually discovering new initiatives close to her heart and finding herself in places she never thought she'd be.

"The biggest change for me was expanding my perspective to the broader level. While I still focus on individual units within my organization, I now consider how decisions can be extended beyond those perimeters. Our team is creating pathways that strengthen support for women and families struggling with substance use disorders; addressing maternal health disparities and exploring ways to transition women from obstetrical care to wellness care," said Utterback, who had her DNP project nominated for an American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) and Delaware Valley Patient Safety & Quality award. An expanded study of the ERAS protocol was later adapted to a poster presentation by the Society for Maternal Fetal Medicine for their 2020 conference and published in the *American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology*.

The success of the ERAS project centered on standardizing patient education about pain management, self-care and managing

expectations after C-section procedures. Long-acting opioid medications customarily given with anesthesia were adjusted to much lower doses, along with increasing patient reliance on non-opioid pain medications during the pre-op phase and helping new mothers become ambulatory as soon as possible after their procedures.

"I am honored with the recognition the project has received for innovation and data analytics. While we were most excited about the results for our patients, the acknowledgement has validated the significance of the work and helped to drive dissemination. The journey has also inspired me to step outside my comfort zone to share the story. In June 2020, I presented my project at the Association for Women's Health, Obstetric, and Neonatal Nursing (AWHONN) national convention." In August 2020, her project garnered the 2020 Excellence in Care Achievement Award from The Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania.

Her DNP program's Systems-Level Leadership track has also informed her work as a committee member on a number of research councils and task forces, in addition to her work as a project lead with the Pennsylvania Perinatal Quality Collaborative on the issue of maternal mortality and the Montgomery County Plan of Safe Care Implementation Team on the issue of opioid use.

Before doctoral projects and national recognition, Utterback worked as a registered nurse for more than 30 years in a variety of roles in women and children's health and informatics. Her path to Abington-Jefferson Health's venerable leadership team was by no means a linear one.

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"I was effectively away from floor nursing for a segment of my career in my role as an informaticist/eLearning clinical content developer for a software company," she said. It wasn't until three years ago that she transitioned back to a hospital setting in a nurse informatics role.

"I have tremendous respect for the human spirit and individual autonomy. As a nurse, I have the opportunity to support people as they navigate some of the most challenging and intimate experiences of their lives, and I work to empower them to maintain their dignity and autonomy throughout."

Utterback earned her Master of Science in Instructional Technology (MSIT) degree from Bloomsburg University, Bloomsburg, Pa.; her Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree from Gwynedd Mercy University, Gwynedd Valley, Pa.; and her Registered Nurse (RN) diploma from Abington Hospital School of Nursing, Abington, Pa. She now serves as a course mentor for TESU facilitating undergraduate- and graduate-level nursing informatics courses and has given a number of scholarly presentations elsewhere centered on obstetrics and maternal/child health.

"The DNP program at TESU was the catalyst that propelled me toward a higher level of leadership," she noted. "It was important that the program I selected had a reputation for quality in nursing and online education, yet was affordable. I also appreciated that it valued my nursing and non-nursing academic experience. It was hard work, but it was a brief 18-month program with a tremendous cohort and academic staff who helped us through. Challenging yes, but doable and entirely worth the effort."

She is quick to point out that it's an achievement that would not have been possible without the support of her family, friends and colleagues as well as the School's educators and the program's distance-learning format.

"More than 30 years into my nursing career, I have gained a renewed level of enthusiasm and excitement about my role in the future of healthcare."

For more information about this and other programs in the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing, visit tesu.edu/nursing.



Susan Utterback stands proudly in her regalia at the 2019 University Commencement celebration.