

GP LINK Lunches | New to General Practice Nursing

Dr Kenneth McCroary (pictured), Chair of Sydney South West GP Link, hosts a series of meetings with clinical/political/regional individuals or organisations to discuss issues and solutions for GPs working in South Western Sydney.



Ken McCroary – Welcome to the latest instalment of GP Link Lunches. At the end of November we recognised Nurses Australia Week so I thought it would be good timing for a discussion regarding primary care nursing in South West Sydney.

Today I am joined by Kristina Allen, Clinical Support Coordinator from the South Western Sydney Primary Health Network, to discuss the New to General Practice Nursing Program. With primary care registered nurses being an integral part of our GP-led primary health team, I thought it would be prudent to discuss and learn about this innovative training program.



Kristina Allen is a registered nurse with more than 20 years' experience in acute care, paediatrics and currently within the primary care setting. Kristina commenced with the PHN back in 2013 working initially in a contract role supporting GPs with chronic disease management in the region. She later moved into a role more focused on up-skilling the nursing workforce within general practice. She has completed a Masters in Clinical Teaching and is currently enrolled in a Cert IV in Training & Assessment, following her passion regarding nurse education and teaching.

Kristina has for a long time recognised the additional need for nurses in general practice, especially new graduates, and has been instrumental in the program design and development of the New to General Practice Nursing Program. It is a 12-month program that provides self-directed online education resources and in-house support and mentorship. She is currently working with the University of Wollongong to have the program allocated credit points and will subsequently approach further universities to gain additional endorsement for the program.

Kristina keeps busy with training and supporting nurses in South Western Sydney whilst caring for her two nature-loving and adventurous daughters. She has shared an interesting insight into family time during COVID lockdown where she and her daughters became great painters of rocks and loved finding other painted rocks families had placed around her estate and had reciprocally placed her own painted rocks for other families to find.

Ken McCroary – So Kristina, are you able to tell me a bit about yourself and the organisation you're working for and representing today please?

Kristina Allen - My name is Kristina Allen and I have been a nurse for over 20 years now. I have experience in acute paediatrics and have now moved into the primary healthcare space. I'm now purely focused on my role as a clinical nurse educator which covers the education and up-skilling of nurses in the workspace of general practice. I currently work for the South Western Sydney Primary Health Network, which is a not-for-profit organisation covering seven local government areas – Bankstown, Camden, Campbelltown, Fairfield, Liverpool, Wingecarribee and Wollondilly. What I do is predominantly practice nurse training, but in that space I have created the 'New to General Practice' nursing program to help nurses who are transitioning from either their university degrees or the acute care setting into the general practice and primary healthcare space.

Ken McCroary - What do you think is the overriding goal/mission/aim of you and your organisation throughout South Western Sydney?

Kristina Allen - I'm just going to relate that back to the space I am operating in. We have identified that in the South Western Sydney Primary Health Network area there is a great number of practice nurses and what we identified was that there were distinguishable gaps in knowledge and lots of practices utilise their nurses to varying degrees. We identified a huge gap between the skill set that nurses had and the skill set that nurses were utilising in general practice. We want to upskill these nurses so they can act independently within the general practice setting - basically to be at the highest level possible to provide support not only to their community members and the clientele that they deal with, but also to assist GPs in clinical practice as well. The aim is for these nurses to provide the best possible support for the health and wellbeing of the population group that they attend to.

Ken McCroary - Now, with us being a local organisation, I'm wondering if you're aware of any particular issues or challenges facing general practitioners working in South Western Sydney?

Kristina Allen - In South Western Sydney there is a substantial amount of patients with multiple chronic illnesses and they're obviously relying heavily on general practices to be able to assist them with this and this places a huge workload on GPs. Our primary aim is to upskill these nurses so they can provide additional support for the GPs to ultimately meet the needs of the population. We also understand that a vast proportion of this population group comes from a lower socio-economic background and they don't have access, or the means to access, certain pathways and find the assistance they need. If we are able to upskill these nurses to understand the referral pathways and the ways we can get additional assistance and help for our population groups, hopefully that can ultimately have a good impact on the quality of their health outcomes. This will hopefully also ease the burden of the GPs always having to action something. Additionally, if we upskill these nurses to understand all the referral pathways and understand what services are out there for their population groups to access, it will ultimately ease the burden on the hospital emergency setting.

Ken McCroary - What are some of the things you think you and this program can do to help support general practice in South Western Sydney?

Kristina Allen - The program is only in its trial stages, and obviously this year has been affected by COVID-19, but I feel that it has helped. We have had a fair bit of feedback from the nurses who have participated in the program and essentially they feel they are more supported because unfortunately in general practice, unlike in the acute setting, nurses don't get one-on-one support. My aim, and our organisation's aim in creating the role for myself, was to assist them with providing the educational support they need through the program, its modules, assessments and discussion forums via the portal. However, nurses also get that one-on-one support from me as a mentor to help them within their practices. So far we have had rave reviews. They feel they have gained more knowledge and understanding of the spectrum of general practice even though they are still just touching on the basics. There is still so much they have to learn but the foundation they are getting will provide the support they need and the systems we have put into place within general practice will actually upskill them further as they progress through their nursing career.

Ken McCroary - That's fantastic, and I really appreciate your time today. Essentially, as our population here in South Western Sydney ages and becomes more complex with their increasing multi-morbidity and their co-morbid diseases and illness, I think having this integral part of our general practice team increasing their skills and contribution to healthcare generally will be beneficial to practitioners, nurses and the rest of the allied primary care team and of course the patients in the region.

Kristina Allen - That is the hope. Obviously all clinicians want the best outcomes for our patients. We don't want our patients to present to either the emergency departments or keep presenting or not feeling supported in their health journey, so we want upskill ourselves with the knowledge of what is available out there and what means we need to access that support. Through our organisation, that means utilising me and the program so we are then able to strengthen our patients' knowledge and understanding. The nurse is in the unique position where they can help the patient, but also in turn help the general practitioner. If we can all have a united approach then we will definitely see improvement in the long term for all our patients that we interact with.

Ken McCroary - That was Kristina Allen from the South Western Sydney Primary Health Network on the 'New to General Practice' nursing program. Thanks again Kristina for your time joining us today.

To find out more about the 'New to General Practice' Program, visit the South Western Sydney PHN website: www.swsphn.com.au/practicenursingprogram