

Reducing Barriers:

Fiona Smith, RPN is a teacher and a researcher dedicated to advancing nursing practice and improving care for the families of gender-variant children.

The type of service that registered psychiatric nurses provide to our communities can vary a great deal. This variety is one of the profession's greatest strengths. It allows RPNs to work in a wide range of settings – including the private and public sector, health care, industry, and beyond. RPNs can work within these settings as clinicians, administrators, educators, and researchers, and more.



Fiona Smith, RPN, is a perfect example of just how flexible and dynamic a career in psychiatric nursing can be. She has a background in clinical practice, but now works in education as an instructor in Brandon University's BScPN program. She's also a researcher whose work explores the attitudes of mental health professionals towards transgendered people.

All her work and experience is connected,

she says, by a deep-seated drive to not only understand how people come to suffer from trauma and mental illness, but to find ways to prevent those problems at their source.

"I didn't want to be an RPN at first," she admits. "My parents both worked at the Selkirk Mental Health Centre and I decided I was going to be different. But in my high school job and as a volunteer, I was surrounded by psych nurses, and I loved listening to them talk about their work. It was a real calling. They were passionate about human nature, psychology, social justice, caring for others, making the world a better place. I wanted to be a part of that."

Fiona graduated with a diploma in psychiatric nursing when she was 25 and soon set her sights on gaining experience in acute care. "I was interested in ultimately working in prevention with families and youth. I thought acute care would be a good place to work backwards, to find out how people got here in the first place, what circumstances led them to trauma and illness, so that I would be more effective at prevention."

AN EDUCATION IN PERPETUAL MOTION

Her clinical career immersed her in a variety of roles and areas at Winnipeg's Health Sciences Centre.

"I loved the variety, the flexibility. Things were constantly changing. I remember thinking I couldn't believe I was getting paid to do this, there was just so much energy in the people I worked with – the other psych nurses, the occupational therapists, the social workers, med student and

psychiatrists. I was surrounded by people genuinely trying to make things better.”

Along the way, Fiona discovered that no matter what the work she was doing, certain core competencies underpinned everything she did as an RPN. “That first became clear to me when I first started working two jobs at the same time: in emergency at night, and with autistic children during the day. Two totally different populations, but I was drawing on the same skills to deal with both. The highly intoxicated, scared, abusive woman in restraints in the emergency room where I was working at night had the same need to connect and communicate as the verbal autistic five-year old I worked with during the day.”

A desire to travel led Fiona to seek out a registered nursing diploma. This was because, at the time, “RNs had more choices in the positions they could take on and the places they could work.” The move paid off, and work in addiction treatment took her to Toronto and England before landing her back in Manitoba. Then she went back to school again, eventually earning a Master of Nursing degree at the University of Calgary with a focus in family nursing.

Fiona’s relentless drive to deepen her professional experience and education led her to contemplate the philosophical connections between education and practice. When a teaching position opened up at the Brandon University’s BScPN program, she leapt at the opportunity to pass on her knowledge and encourage young RPNs to take a deeper, wider look at their own professional practice.

“As a teacher I’m interested in opening up the discussion to consider more than just the

facts, the data, the bullet points we’re traditionally used to focusing on in the classroom. Instead, what happens when we talk about experience? At the very least, I hope it teaches my students to be aware of what lies outside the box, and be more comfortable dealing with that.”

Fiona now teaches courses that focus on therapeutic groups, family counselling, and health promotion across the lifespan. By accepting a teaching position at Brandon University, Fiona had also agreed to earn a PhD. In 2010, she enrolled in the Applied Health Sciences program at the University of Manitoba. Thanks to her master’s experience she was hardly a stranger to the demands of earning a research degree. Nevertheless, coming up with a viable topic for her PhD research dissertation proved a daunting challenge.

Until lightning struck. Three times.

GENDER STUDIES

“While I was deciding what to explore in my PhD research, three families in my social circle had kids come out as transgender.”

As Fiona listened to their stories, their experiences struck an echo with themes she’d unearthed in her master’s-level research at the University of Calgary. There, she had explored the experiences of “parents seeking help for kids who were depressed. I wanted to find out about how these mothers negotiated the healthcare system and where they ultimately found support.”

That research had led to a surprising discovery. “I was expecting to talk to mothers about their 16-year-old daughters,

but every single woman I talked to was talking to me about her son. Even though they were depressed, these boys were being identified as bad, or acting out, or the mom was somehow to blame. That got me interested in beliefs about gender. In short, these families weren't getting the care they needed, or they were turning outside the healthcare system to get it."

Now, as a PhD student, she recognized "the same themes I had seen before with the moms of depressed kids: these parents of gender-variant kids were looking for help with something the conventional framework of the healthcare system wasn't quite able to recognize in a helpful way."

In 2015, Fiona conducted an online survey of nearly 450 nursing students across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and BC. Her questions measured their familiarity and comfort with people who identify as transgender. Her ultimate goal was to determine how prepared new healthcare professionals really are to work with transgender people, and to treat them equally.

She's now analyzing the data, and while she hesitates to draw too many conclusions, she says negative attitudes from healthcare professionals towards transgendered people do lead to social distance – "but that healthcare workers who say they're uncomfortable hanging out with a transgender person aren't unwilling to provide them with care."

On the other hand, she's seeing signs that many healthcare professionals who claim to be willing to provide care to transgendered people may not be prepared to, or have the resources they need.

As a result of her expertise in a relatively new field that continues to challenge the healthcare system the world over, Fiona sits on several professional committees and associations dedicated to giving care providers a place to share knowledge. Once her research dissertation is defended, she says she hopes "to bring what I've learned to the table so we reduce barriers to mental health for people who don't fit into our traditional gender boxes."

And just as her clinical experience and professional education fed into her research, so her research now feeds back into her teaching. "As an educator, I want all my students – the future RPNs of the world – to start thinking about how they can support all families, however we define them."

She adds that teaching, especially when it's combined with research, is the perfect career track for RPNs who are driven, as she is, by profound curiosity about human nature.

"You're supported in following your ideas and communicating what you find to others in a way that can have a hugely positive impact on our practice, and the communities our practice serves."