

Healing Bodies, Minds and Hearts

by Ryan McBride

The Sexual Assault Program at Winnipeg's Health Sciences Centre treats nearly 360 victims of sexual violence each year.

Hidden deep in the heart of the HSC, the program provides a safe location for victims to meet with a team of professionals dedicated to their care.

Professionals like **Ashley Smith**, RPN.



A nurse clinician with a Bachelor of Science in Psychiatric Nursing, Ashley helps her patients deal with the trauma of their ordeal “using the same skills I learned in my psych nursing degree.”

But Ashley is also a *forensic nurse* — which means she's received specialized training to help victims of violence. Forensic nurses work closely with the criminal justice system — the Medical Examiner's Office or Manitoba Corrections, for instance — or in forensic psychiatry.

Their job is to treat body and mind, and to collect evidence.

Ashley explains:

“When someone comes to us and they've been assaulted, I'll perform a medical exam, take body swabs for DNA samples, collect items of clothing for evidence. I document any injuries and compile very detailed descriptions of the physical trauma they've suffered. All that evidence then becomes part of the case of whatever authority is investigating the assault.”

The program often works closely with Manitoba Justice, Victim Services, the Child Protection Centre, Winnipeg Police and the RCMP.

But patients don't have to involve law enforcement, she adds. “In that case, we offer a medical assessment, we treat their injuries, we provide prophylaxis for sexually transmitted infections that can occur from the assault. And we offer support.”

That support extends beyond the initial visit. “We work closely with Klinik Community Health Centre and their sexual assault program. They have volunteers that are available 24/7 to come out and be an advocate and a support for the patient. And we'll connect our patients with other resources in the community,” such as ongoing medical care or counseling.

The HSC's Sexual Assault Program is the only program of its kind in Winnipeg, and the only formal program in Manitoba. Candidates for the nurse clinician role must pass through 40 hours of intensive training. The training builds on the skills taught in nursing programs and offers additional education in evidence collection techniques, focused

assessment, testing and treating sexually transmitted infections, and providing emotional support to victims of sexual assault.

“Learning how to conduct a pelvic exam and collect evidence — those are very different from the things you normally learn during psychiatric nurse training.”

After her training, Ashley was buddied with an experienced nurse until she was able to work independently. Ongoing continuing education keeps her skills and knowledge up to date. She’s been part of the program now since 2008, and says the most rewarding aspect of her work is when she gets to see the positive impact of her skills first-hand.

“That’s what drew me to psychiatric nursing in the first place: working closely with a patient and building that therapeutic rapport, and helping them come through crisis or trauma.”

The same drive motivates Ashley’s other role – as an RPN working for the Transgender Health Clinic, part of Klinik Community Health Centre. THK helps people living with gender dysphoria by providing assistance with medical transitioning, which may include hormone therapy, voice therapy, or gender affirming surgery. They also provide emotional support and referrals for psychological assessments that are commonly required before surgery.

There’s currently a long waiting list for Manitobans seeking Klinik’s trans health services, and Ashley is often their first point of contact before they meet with a medical practitioner. “I do the first assessment. I go over their gender history, find out what brought them to the

program and what they hope we can do for them. I ask them what supports they have and review their medical history.”

While her RPN training gave her the foundation she needs for the role, she’s also received additional on-the-job training in endocrinology and gender-sensitive care.

“We have a caseload of approximately 250 people right now,” she says, “and the waiting list is growing. We’re seeing a lot of younger patients, now that our society is more open about transgender issues. Some of the people who come to us have suffered in silence for years, and we’re the first person they’ve even spoken to about their gender dysphoria.”

“And then you get to see how much their mental health — their entire quality of life — improves as they become the person they truly are. The change in their quality of life is remarkable.”