

Independent Practice, Collaborative Spirit

By Ryan McBride

It's no great surprise that **Patricia van Aggelen**, RPN chose to pursue a career in psychiatric nursing. Her father was a psychiatrist, and from the age of two she was raised on mental hospital grounds in England, Newfoundland, and finally Brandon, Manitoba. "I've been around people living with or treating mental illness my entire life."

After a brief but unfulfilling stint in retail, Patricia enrolled in the Brandon Mental Health Centre's psychiatric nursing program when she realized the career had been literally staring her right in the face: "It dawned on me as I stood on the back doorstep of my house, which was approximately forty feet from the back of the nurse's residence where the training program took place."

After graduating with a Psychiatric Nursing Diploma in 1974, Patricia worked for a year at the Brandon Mental Health Centre, and then as a ward RPN at Grace General Hospital in Winnipeg. In 1989, Doctors Manitoba (then the Manitoba Medical Association) hired Patricia as a therapist for its Physicians at Risk Program. Physicians at Risk confidentially supports doctors and the families of doctors facing difficult experiences in their private and professional lives.

In the beginning, Patricia primarily treated the families of physicians dealing with depression, anxiety, addiction, stress and relationship issues. Over the next 20 years, the role expanded to include physicians themselves. Patricia also facilitates a Spousal Support Group and, more recently, a Residents Support Group for residents trying to find balance between the rigors of medical training and their personal lives.

"In my work with Doctors Manitoba, it's particularly evident that attitudes are changing, people are feeling less stigmatized and judged than when I started all those years ago. Part of that has to do with the great job Doctors Manitoba does in providing support for physicians and promoting programs like Physicians at Risk."



Patricia's office, where she treats her patients, is a quiet, comfortable and anonymous townhouse. The space is used by both Physicians at Risk and Renaissance Mental Health Services, Patricia's independent practice, which she launched in 1994. The only difference between her work at Physicians at Risk and Renaissance Mental Health Services is the clients she serves. Through the latter, she treats private individuals and their families.

She is one of only a few RPNs in Manitoba who work in independent practice. But the numbers are growing. Some independent practitioners, like Patricia, provide therapy in the community, while others provide consultation services to health care organizations or providers. Starting an independent practice requires RPNs to

develop a business plan and have a thorough understanding of insurance requirements and privacy laws. Regardless of the nature of their practice, all RPNs are fully accountable to the CRPNM Standards of Practice, Code of Ethics, and Guidelines for Independent Practice.

Patricia went into independent practice to enjoy a more long-term therapeutic relationship with her patients. She says the most gratifying aspect of her work is “the privilege of seeing someone progress from fear and vulnerably to optimum mental health” – a journey she might not otherwise have the opportunity to witness working as a ward nurse, for example. She tailors a wide range of therapeutic approaches to the specific needs of her patients, and sometimes offers patients the option of inviting family members to sessions to be a part of the healing process.

Ultimately, she sees her role as not only therapist but advocate and collaborator.

“I’m an advocate in that I facilitate my patients’ recovery by whatever means possible. I attempt to collaborate with other health care providers to try and implement a team approach to ensure everyone is working towards the same goals for the best outcome. Having said that, it’s imperative to maintain boundaries and always work within the scope of my expertise, which means being aware of and acknowledging my limitations as a therapist, advocate and collaborator. And finally, I also see myself as a promoter of the registered psychiatric nursing profession. Believe me when I say I do exactly that at every opportunity!”