

Leader to Honor: Sharon Pappas, PhD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN

Tim Porter-O'Grady, DM, EdD, ScD(h), APRN, FAAN, FACCWS



Sharon Pappas, PhD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN (seated, center), is chief of the Nurse Executive Team for Emory Healthcare in Atlanta, Georgia.

TP: What is it that drives you?

SP: I'm both energized and impatient with the status quo. I've always had a desire to make things better, to find new ways of thinking and doing. Developing my leadership approach with this urge in mind led me to address the deeper question, and to

“push the walls.” I'm looking for different ways of thinking about and approaching problems. I believe for leaders in today's world that we are now required to embrace innovative thinking, new tactics and approaches, and we need to devise unique solutions to age-old problems. One of my favorite things

to do is to align across disciplines including medicine and business to make nursing more visible as a solution to many health care problems.

TP: What leadership characteristics were the executives at Emory Healthcare looking for that attracted you to this organization?

SP: Emory leadership was looking for a person who brought some of the personal drivers I've mentioned. However, they were also looking for a leader who had a strong commitment to interpersonal interaction and relationships—someone to build and strengthen the engagement and teamwork necessary to transform both the organization and nursing work. It was essentially the same thing that interested me in coming to Atlanta. Emory Healthcare is a large complex health care organization, multiservice in its scope with a wide range of health services, institutions, and agencies, and an organization well-placed in the community. I've been a nursing leader in a number of organizations so I was able to bring to the chief nurse executive role a number of leadership accomplishments across the systems within which I've worked. I also have the capacity to visualize and translate the long view for nursing and health care. I think this mix of skills and attributes was just the right fit for them and for me, so 2 years ago, I decided to accept the challenge at Emory Healthcare.

TP: This meant a return to Atlanta where you began your nursing career, didn't it?

SP: I felt like I was returning to my roots. I was born and reared and received my primary education in Georgia. When it came time for college, I was already clear that I would go into nursing. Early in my childhood, I was visiting my grandfather in the hospital after his receiving a pacemaker for a cardiac rhythm problem. I watched this nurse, dressed head to foot in white, enter my grandfather's room and tell him that she was here to teach him how to live with his pacemaker. From that point going forward, I wanted to be part of a profession that taught people how to live—both patients and those who cared for them. So, after graduating from high school, I went to the Medical College of Georgia, School of Nursing, and completed my BSN. I then became a pediatric cardiology nurse at Egleston Children's Hospital in Atlanta, and I fell in love with the clinical demands, rigors, and pace of the hospital. My first taste of leadership was as an

evening shift charge nurse, and after the next few years, I was tapped to serve as a unit manager. I knew then that leadership was my destiny. The role just fit me well. At the same time, it did raise challenges in my mind regarding the barriers, boundaries, and systems issues which both informed and often constrained goodness of nursing practice. These initiatives only served to deepen my desire to drill down, problem solve, and ultimately to make a difference.

TP: What did you do to advance and deepen your leadership knowledge and skills?

SP: I knew I was interested in leadership, but I wasn't fully sure what that meant. My mentor at the time encouraged me to develop and deepen my learning and understanding of leadership in complex health systems. She alerted me to how important it was to advance my education if I was going to make a meaningful and sustainable difference in addressing the issues that impacted nursing practice. I had to go at it 3 times, however. I was looking for the right masters' degree pathway. I



Dr. Sharon Pappas (left) and Dean Linda McCauley, Emory School of Nursing

began with a CNS [clinical nurse specialist] pathway and found that it wasn't quite right for what I was looking to do and didn't quite address my passion. I next then thought that pursuing the role of an educator would better position me for the impact I was looking to have. Still, I found, while education was fulfilling, it didn't quite get me to what I was looking for to provide the kind of leadership I believed demonstrated the best fit for me. In my third go at it, I entered the nursing administration masters degree pathway at Georgia College in Milledgeville. This program combined nursing administration with business administration courses and provided a broader understanding and application of both the art and science of health system management and leadership with the competencies of nursing administration. Finally, it was the right fit. With my newly minted masters degree, my horizons were expanded for leadership and led me to the opportunity to assume role first as an educator and then as the manager for the emergency department at the Medical Center of Central Georgia Health System. My masters thesis focused on "nurse hardiness," which reinforced my career interest in nurse engagement, practice ownership, and resiliency. These issues informed my leadership priorities and guided me to undertaking the many challenges I would confront in my career as a manager and, ultimately, a chief nursing officer at Porter Adventist Hospital and as the first chief nurse executive for Centura Health in Denver, Colorado.

TP: What made you want to pursue your PhD?

SP: While I was in Colorado, I began to realize that I had a need for deepening my scholarship and understanding of the

relationships and interactions between the larger health systems issues and the nursing role. After 13 years of leadership I became weary of the battle nurses constantly experienced while defending the role and impact of nursing in the face of the constant and uneven attention for cost control. I wanted to be able to understand and to translate the full story of the value of nursing practice and its relationship to organizational viability, sustainability, and advancing the health of individuals and communities. I found the PhD program at the University of Colorado ideally focused on the scholarship I was looking for and found necessary to address these many concerns. It really assisted me in deepening my scholarship and leadership to be able to strengthen the nursing role in health system decision-making, advance nursing value, and really affirm the clinical and financial impact of nursing across health service organizations. I feel really strongly that this deeper level of scholarship, this sense of "a deeper knowing" has very much better prepared and positioned me for both advocacy and leadership in further developing the power, influence, competence, and resilience of nurses and nursing in both participating in and especially in leading health systems change.

TP: I've heard you talking about engaging healthy partnerships; can you tell us more about that?

SP: Fortunately for me, Emory Healthcare provides both a template and an opportunity to further my vision of advancing nursing practice and partnership and, of course, better determining the clinical and financial value of nursing contribution in a way that advances the health of both individuals and communities. Emory claims a proud and positive tradi-



Dr. Sharon Pappas (fourth from left) and Emory Professional Nursing Practice Council

**Current role:**

Chief nurse executive, Emory Healthcare, Atlanta, Georgia.

Education:

BSN, Medical College of Georgia School of Nursing, Augusta, Georgia; MSN, Georgia College, Milledgeville, Georgia; PhD, University of Colorado College of Nursing, Denver, Colorado.

This I know for sure:

When nursing goes well, the rest will follow.

Most people don't know:

I obtained a pilot's license and flew a Piper Warrior plane.

One thing I'd like to learn how to do:

First, be a better listener, and personally, learn how to paddle-board.

Hobbies:

I like to hike, especially by water for the opportunity it gives me for peace and reflection; I also love skiing with my daughter (although she boards) and my granddaughters.

Best words to describe me:

Champion for nurses; passionate; practical visionary.

One or 2 of the things of which you are most proud:

I am so proud to have a daughter who is a new nurse and practices at Emory Healthcare in critical care, and a second daughter who is an educator. And I am most proud when I see health systems succeed because of nursing!

tion of bringing excellent medical care to the Atlanta region. However, like every health system in the US that seeks to thrive in this emerging new future, Emory has much to do to transform its heretofore successful medical model in a new way that more effectively addresses service value, community health, and clinical/health service research with more relevance and effectiveness that better reflects the characteristics of our digital age. This effort not only includes nurses, but calls nurses especially to play a strong role in leading this transformation.

So, at Emory, I can commit my energies to really taking on this challenge of building partnerships across the discipline around a common goal of advancing and improving health care and service. Here, I can build the infrastructure, skills, and nursing leadership capacity that's necessary to emphasize and expand opportunities for nurses to more fully engage and participate in decisions and actions that help lead the transformation of the health system. For me, this means taking my experience, my scholarship, and leadership roles as a chief nurse executive, a Magnet® commissioner, and author, and the many insights I gained from my national roles and bring them together in a confluence of talents and skills that can help facilitate the transformation of Emory nursing in this new age for health care. And I can see that this work is already having an impact as I watch nursing roles change, relationships and partnerships grow and nursing practice have a stronger impact in the greater Emory system. After a period of limited relationships between the School of Nursing and Emory Healthcare Nursing, Dean Linda McCauley and I have now forged a strong partnership, and together have undertaken an effort to create a mutually strong voice and role for nurses and nursing across the system. We've even begun to publish the work of our partnership and its impact to help provide an exemplar for other nursing leaders.

I also feel strongly that nursing's own "house" must get itself together and operate seamlessly within to successfully address its role as an equitable and contributing partner with other disciplines in shaping the future of the health system. I think my learning and leadership experience has been strongly informed by my personal belief that nurses are critical to the success and sustainability of health system decisions and actions. I also strongly believe that nurses in a healthy culture will always do great work. Here at Emory, I try to daily reaffirm that nurses are the single largest provider at the point of service upon which any successful implementation of health system change is clearly dependent. So, some of my personal leadership priorities at Emory are to further develop and refine nursing leadership capacity, strengthen the professional governance model, advance nursing exemplars of patient care excellence, and create strong and equitable partnerships across the disciplines around patient care priorities we all share. I think all of this clearly points to the requisite for nurses to lead and to transform the patient's health experience.

TP: You have had a strong commitment to nursing practice excellence over your leadership career and play a leadership role with the Magnet Commission. Can you share with us about that work?

SP: One the reasons I commit time and passion to the Magnet Program as a commissioner is the belief I have about the Magnet Model. I believe the well-researched Model serves as the evidence-based practice for nursing leaders. It provides a framework for a nursing practice environment that yields excellent patient outcomes through the practice of nursing. Those who become expert at the outcomes associated with the framework should pursue the Magnet credential. With the growing numbers of Magnet hospitals (although still less than 10% of all hospitals), more organizations have realized the impact nurses have in leading health care practices because of their expanded influence learned through professional governance and inter professional teamwork all characteristics of Magnet cultures.

TP: As a part of your vision for the future of nursing, do you have some insights about what lies ahead for nurses?

SP: The closer the collaboration across education, practice, and research the better job we will do in improving health care value and exposing nursing impact. The expense of nurse staffing in health systems is growing from the high demand for clinical nurses. Clearly, there are many opportunities to reduce operational costs in health care, and focus should shift from a focus on the cost of a nurse to the cost impact of expert nursing care—this is achieved from a closer connection between education and practice with efficiency of measurement and evaluation to test effectiveness—quality and cost, which is value. Nurses create this value, and we should leverage that.

Increases in the use of technology to provide nurses and other clinicians with information that improves safety for patients and efficiency for clinicians. This is great, *and* the nursing professional must always remember the unique contributions of nurses including, and certainly not limited to, the empathy and compassion nurses provide. My definition of nursing goes like this: nursing is the absolute privilege of caring for someone at a point in their life when they are most vulnerable. How can technology allow nurses opportunities for this human interaction?

Our future is soundly in the hands of nurses from what is referred to as the millennial generation. They are brilliant with an insatiable curiosity. I am sure they will lead nursing into a place that both honors our tradition and imagines the possible.

TP: Are you still in touch with that energy to make a difference you first experienced in nursing leadership years ago?

SP: Most certainly. I am both energized and challenged by unlimited opportunities for making a significant difference at Emory Healthcare. Recent changes across the leadership landscape throughout Emory have brought a number of new executives from outside the system together with existing Emory leadership to create a multiplicity of leaders bringing a diversity of insights and experiences to the challenges of transforming our system. I am committed to developing relationships and partnerships across the executive landscape and offer my own role and skills as the catalyst for building new organizational intersections for service. I'm committed

to creating a new collective leadership dialogue that will inform the decisions and actions of each and every executive across Emory Healthcare. Here again, it's my belief that as this can be done at the executive level across the system, it will accelerate the expectations and opportunity of seeing the same pattern of behaviors emerge at every place across Emory Healthcare.

I really feel that my chief nurse executive role is a culmination of my life journey and my desire to make a difference. I think this is a role that I've been preparing for every step in my nursing career. When I think back over my experiences and my many opportunities for learning and scholarship, I'm seeing them converged in this role with a resulting mix of talent and skills that can positively impact both strategies and behaviors. Through this leadership, I can help move individual nurses and nursing at Emory to practice at their full capacity and to participate in leading the system towards its best future. What more can a leader ask for? **NL**

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