

Leader to Watch

Linda Knodel, MHA, MSN, FACHE, FAAN

Linda Burnes Bolton, DrPH, RN, FAAN

Linda Knodel is chief nurse executive and senior vice president of national patient care services for Kaiser Permanente, where she leads nearly 63,000 nurses. Knodel reports to Gregory A. Adams, executive vice president and group president. Prior to joining Kaiser Permanente in 2017, Knodel served as senior vice president and chief nursing officer for Mercy Health System, a large Catholic health care system serving residents in Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma. Knodel has decades of experience and expertise in leadership across inpatient, ambulatory, and continuum-of-care settings. She is a past president of the American Organization for Nursing Leadership (AONL), and was the 2016 recipient of the American College of Healthcare Executives Gold Medal Award, which recognizes leaders who have made significant contributions to the health care profession.



LBB: What attracted you to a career in health care? Why did you choose to pursue your roles?

LK: It started when I was in grade school. I would see these women with starched uniforms and caps, and thought it would be nice to be like them when I grew up. I was hospitalized as a child, and one of

the nurses inspired me to enter the profession. Later, when I was a candy striper, I met a woman who was a 101 years old. She refused to eat unless I fed her. That's my first powerful memory of being a caregiver. I loved being of use to her, making a difference in her life. That passion to serve others has propelled me ever since.



LBB: Tell us about your first role in health care. What did you learn, and how have you used that experience to guide others entering the field?

LK: I was hired in 1974 as a new grad on the night shift. The nursing staff on the unit included RNs, LPNs, and nurse aides. I was a novice, and that team helped me so much as I learned how to function as a nurse. We were led by a true nurse leader, and she became one of my role models. She taught us the value of engaging and empowering staff. We all worked together and changed the approach to completing care plans to better serve our patients. I received a picture of the team recently. Looking at that picture, I was struck by how powerfully we were connected, and still are, from the work we did to together as a team committed to the provision of excellent care. Those kinds of connections are so important for a young nurse. Nurses supporting each other, and learning from each other, is the bedrock of our profession.

LBB: As you reflect on your career, tell us about some of the most challenging periods. What happened? How has the experience impacted your role as a health care executive?

LK: I've learned that opportunities abound in health care, and when doors open, walk through them. I spent the first 36 years of my career in the same institution, and then for the next 7 years, I had the opportunity to

become a leader at a large health care system before joining Kaiser Permanente as senior vice president and chief nursing executive at the national program office.

Throughout my career, no matter the setting, I said yes to many requests to assume new roles that allowed me to learn and grow. For example, early in my career, the CEO asked me to start up and run a home care agency, which I oversaw for several years. I was asked to assist with the creation of budgets for departments outside of nursing, which I did, and I learned to truly understand and even love the financial aspects of health care.

All along, I coupled my professional experience with advancing my academic credentials so that I would be prepared to do more for those we served, our communities, and the profession. I graduated from a diploma nursing school in 1974. I received my bachelor's in health care administration in 1993, and I was inspired and entered a master's program in health care administration 1 month after completing my baccalaureate degree. A few years later, our organization chose to pursue Magnet® designation. The standards required the CNO to have either a bachelor's or master's in nursing. I had neither. The Sisters who owned and operated the system also ran the local university. Together, we were able to develop curricula that met the standards, and 23 nurse managers and I went back to school to obtain our master's in nursing. The year after we all graduated, the organization

received designation and recognition from the Magnet commission.

With the support of the hospital's CEO, who had a passion for cutting edge innovation when it wasn't in vogue, one of the hospitals in our system became one of the very first critical access hospitals in the United States and served as a role model for other facilities. The state health department solicited my assistance understanding the new standards and processes for hospitals to receive such a designation. We developed a leadership development program for all leaders across the system and even health care partners such as clinics and ambulatory surgery centers in the community.

In taking on those challenges and many more, I was fortunate to have mentors who allowed me to grow in a supportive environment. In turn, I have been privileged to be able to offer that same mentorship to other colleagues. It's that kind of mutual support that makes challenging times and difficult situations manageable, and even rewarding.

LBB: The demand for affordable health care continues to expand. How are you and your organization addressing the demand?

LK: Kaiser Permanente has a long history of care innovation and that legacy continues. We know that efficient, effective care increases both affordability and quality. Every day, we are looking at new ways to leverage every aspect of our integrated care model to drive affordability, improve access and outcomes, and meet and exceed the expectations of our members and patients. We see ourselves as a learning organization. We learn from the external landscape, and we learn from our own staff and our own patients. The organization utilizes a state-of-the-art innovation center called The Garfield Center to test new and innovative approaches to the provision of safe, effective, and affordable care. We work very closely with our physician colleagues, staff, labor unions, and our members, engaging them as partners in the creation of design system prototypes to meet the health care needs of the future.

LBB: Looking ahead, what areas are you pursuing and why?

LK: We are committed to using data and systemness—including tests of change—to decrease costs and increase quality by reducing variation and unnecessary care interventions. We are investing in the use of big data to design new approaches for the delivery of care that recognize our members access our system at various points, for various reasons across the continuum. Care can no longer be episodic.

Leadership and staff development are vital as information is available at warp speed, as is the need to respond quicker and better to the expectations of our members and potential new members. To achieve this kind of agility and commitment to improvement, you

need to develop and empower nurses. The Deloras Jones Scholarship Fund is just 1 example of our wide-ranging staff development. This fund has enabled over 2,000 staff members to go back to school and obtain advanced degrees in nursing, supported by \$50 million in funding over the past 10 years.

Helping our nurses learn, and the organization in turn learning from the practice of our nurses, is essential, not just for Kaiser Permanente's success, but also for the advancement of the profession. This past year, Kaiser Permanente nurses authored more than 78 research and peer review publications. At AONL this year, we held a session where our nurse researchers and scholars presented eight 10-minute briefs on the content of their research. Over the last 2.5 years, The Nurse Scholars Academy graduated more than 248 nurses at varying levels in their academic progression. Our partnerships with schools of nursing allows both nursing practice and academia to advance student learning at a much more intense pace that incorporates the latest nursing evidence and research.

LBB: What are you hoping to accomplish in the next 3 to 5 years?

LK: I am committed to working alongside the executive leadership, our nursing leadership team, and the staff nurses of Kaiser Permanente to ensure evidence and the most current research influences the care that is provided to our members. Our system is on the Magnet journey and committed to the value that designation brings to our members and patients as we continually improve quality, access, and affordability.

I am committed to keeping nursing front and center as an essential component of our highly competent healthcare team across Kaiser Permanente. We are also committed to growing the professional practice of nursing and maximizing the contribution of nursing to the health of our nation. Recently, a Kaiser Permanente nurse leader was featured in *Nurse Leader* for contributing to the development of the curriculum within the new Kaiser Permanente Medical School. Building that curriculum was highly collaborative and interprofessional, and it was so important that nursing was at the table.

LBB: Speak about Greg. How do you plan and work together?

LK: Most importantly, I feel greatly supported and always challenged—in a great way—we work together to further enhance the role of nursing, for Kaiser Permanente and for the nation. I proudly sit at the organization's highest executive table, and the nursing voice is present and strong throughout the organization. Greg and I see eye to eye on the power and importance of nursing in the care continuum and feel very fortunate to be part of his phenomenal leadership team.

Greg is a nurse and business leader. He recognizes the value of leveraging talent and expertise from all aspects of the organization—from that frontline nurse to the C-suite executives—to ensure we are providing the best care and service we have to offer with every patient and member interaction. It is amazing the synergy that occurs when people involved in setting strategy and people directly involved in operations regularly meet. There is a powerful collective focus and minimization of silos as we pursue the greater good.

Our strategy is to achieve top-quality outcomes through evidence-based clinical practices that reduce waste and promote efficiency. We want to make sure that we are providing equitable, person-centered care that is personalized to our patients' and members' individual needs.

When I began my new role at Kaiser Permanente, I met with over 1500 Kaiser Permanente members, physicians, nurses, executives, and leaders within the first 90 days of my employment. Their voices, stories, and input provided a framework to engage and learn how we might further enhance the role of nursing in the organization.

Once the assessment was complete, it became apparent we needed to revise our vision statement to reflect the challenges of today and tomorrow. Our new vision statement has many handprints on it because this revision was truly a collaborative effort. Today, we carry this vision statement with pride on our professional practice model badge, which is connected to our identification badge. We begin our meetings with reciting this strong and bold vision statement as we focus on our professional practice journey.

As leaders, clinicians, researchers, innovators and scientists, Kaiser Permanente nurses are advancing the delivery of excellent, compassionate care for our members across the continuum, and boldly transforming care to improve the health of our communities and nation.

This is our commitment to who we are as KP nurses, the service we provide to the profession, our patients, and the nation.

LBB: What are the significant accomplishments that you have achieved together?

LK: First and foremost, we are leveraging and lifting up the professional practice of nursing through role modeling. Our frontline nurses and nurse leaders are so important, and we are committed to supporting them.

Secondly, we are on the journey to Magnet across Kaiser Permanente. We have 2 facilities that have received Magnet designation, and several are in the queue to be assessed.

Third, we have made great progress on ensuring that our members have a similar, high-quality experience no matter where they receive care. Our executive vice president/chief medical officer and I lead our



Name:

Linda Jane Knodel

Hometown:

Williston, ND

Current job:

Senior vice president/CNE Kaiser Permanente National Patient Care Services

Education:

Diploma nursing, BS healthcare administration, MHA, MSN, FACHE, FAAN

First job in nursing:

Night shift, medical floor at St. Alexius Medical Center in Bismarck, ND

Being in a leadership position gives me the opportunity to:

Influence new and aspiring nurse leaders, teach and inform interdisciplinary professional practice, as well as impact the important care we are privileged to provide

Most people don't know that I:

Enjoy designing and sewing clothes as well as window coverings

My best advice to aspiring leaders:

Be bold and reach out to those leaders you wish to learn from. Never stop learning and developing new competencies over the course of your career.

One thing I want to learn:

I would love to learn to tap dance!

One word to describe me:

Servant-leader

national hospital council, which is focused on spreading best practices and reducing variations in care and member experience. The council, along with many other Kaiser Permanente executives, is developing and executing strategies that allow all of us to learn from each other so scale can be achieved within a highly reliable system of care.

LBB: What advice do you have for health care executives?

LK: Never stop learning. Stay connected to the field through professional membership and forums that allow

for continuous learning. Regularly engage staff and patients to assure their voices are being heard. To truly be effective as a health care executive, you have to embrace servant leadership. Look at everything you do in terms of attending to the needs of those you serve—your colleagues, your members, and your staff. When service to others is your primary motivation, your focus on solving problems and developing people is greatly enhanced.

LBB: Leaders seeking to advance should consider:

LK: Just as you should always be mentoring, you should also be continually looking for those who can mentor you. Build your own personal advisory board of people who are willing to serve in your continuous growth and development. More than likely, these individuals would be honored to be consulted for their expertise and experience. And make sure you look outside of nursing and health care.

LBB: What are you passionate about?

LK: Because I stay close to students through university advisory board appointments, job shadowing, advising,

and teaching, I am passionate that our nurses of the future will create an environment few of us can see today. It will be team oriented, values based, and cognitively and technically competent. Spaces where care is delivered will change dramatically, and nurses will lead the change and lead the future of care delivery.

LBB: I remain committed to:

LK: I remain committed to quality and professionalism in health care. As a unique member of a team, I commit to always carry the voice of the patient and the nurse in all that I do. If that remains your true north, you will bring true value to everyone you serve.

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