



ARNOLD AND ORPHA SCHRYVERS

A professional and personal passion

Few nurses understand spinal cord injuries like Winnipeg's Orpha Schryvers. Not only has she specialized in the area for nearly 30 years, she's also taken her passion home. Orpha's husband of 21 years is tetraplegic. "It's given me a unique perspective," she says. "Families feel more open to asking me questions. Young men send their girlfriends to me for counseling."

BY BARBARA SIBBALD, BJ

Barbara Sibbald is a health care journalist based in Ottawa, Ontario.

Although her husband's injury has "defined our life together," Orpha Schryvers feels she's learned more from living with him, than she had in years of practice. "I don't know that I would be in this position today if I hadn't decided to be a part of his life," she says. Her clinical work has been recognized by the Canadian Paraplegic Association, and she started the area's first outpatient clinic. But these days she researches treatments for the complications of spinal cord injuries at Winnipeg's Health Sciences Centre (HSC).

She's come a long way from her rural roots, as the middle child in a Mennonite farming family of eight in Altona, Manitoba. When she was nine, her family moved to Winnipeg, where her dad became an upholsterer. And at 14, she suddenly decided to become a nurse, but isn't quite sure why. She'd been a candystriper for awhile, but had always dreamed of teaching. Once she decided on nursing, though, she knew it was right.

To earn tuition, she worked at the Conquist Nursing Home in Winnipeg and learned what nursing should be. "They taught me how to care and that everyone is special. I was more sold on nursing than ever before."

After her three-year diploma program at the Grace General Hospital she opted for public health nursing in Russell, four hours west of Winnipeg. For 18 months she did well-baby clinics, immunizations and the like, but then realized she needed a university degree to get ahead. She applied for certification in public health but the program closed down and she couldn't afford four years of university. She began sending her resume around and accepted the first job offer that came her way: a general duty nurse at the 25-bed Spinal Cord Injury Unit at the Rehab Hospital then run by the Sanatorium Board of Manitoba (later the Health Sciences Centre). It was a turn of events that changed her life.

She found the work with amputee and spinal cord injury patients both physically and emotionally demanding. "It was very difficult, at first, to work with people who were so young, with such catastrophic injuries. With each new person I lived their nightmare over and over." Eventually, though, she was able to "deal with the reality of it," and she enjoyed getting to really know people during their long stays in hospital. She soon earned a certificate in rehabilitation nursing.

"I realized pretty quickly that I enjoyed nursing there and I was good at it." She pauses to reflect. "As a child I wanted to teach. In rehab nursing you are a teacher - you have to teach people how to live their new life."

In 1976, she was promoted to assistant head nurse at the Spinal Cord Injury Unit, but it wasn't ideal. "I was too demanding of the staff. I was always fighting them on behalf of the patients. It wasn't my best role." However, her interest in the field remained vital. In 1977 she completed a six-month course on treatment and rehabilitation of spinal paraplegia at the National Spinal Injuries Centre in Stoke-Mandeville, England. The centre had 150 to 200 patients, some from the Second World War, which made for an "exceptional" learning experience.

Soon after returning to Winnipeg, Orpha

began working toward an Arts degree part-time, having decided that psychology would be most useful. "The psychological impact of these injuries is so much a part of the care," she explains. "How well individuals do the rest of their lives depends on how well they cope with their injury." While working and studying Orpha also became a board member of the Canadian Paraplegic Association (Manitoba Inc.).

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Throughout this time, since 1975, she had been working with Arnold Schryvers, a peer rehab counsellor for the Canadian Paraplegic Association (CPA) who had been seconded to the Health Sciences Centre. When "Arnie" was 17 he was working in a British Columbia lumber camp and a log fell on his head. Arnold is a tetraplegic (the new word for quadriplegic*) who eventually found work helping the newly injured reintegrate and cope with their injury. The two worked together and shared concerns about their patients. Then, much to Orpha's surprise, one day he asked her out.

In 1979 they married and she took over as his caregiver so they could remain as independent as possible. The routine of his care needs has now become as routine as brushing her teeth. The two drive to work together and spend a lot of time with each other, but "I never feel we spend enough time together," she says. "He's my pillar and as a counsellor for the CPA he receives a lot of admiration from a lot of people, especially the young. He helps them cope."

The year of her marriage was to be one of more change. Dr. Hy Dubo, director of the Spinal Cord Injury Unit, recognized the need for an outpatient clinic and put Orpha in charge. They introduced a follow-up program for newly discharged patients,

yearly kidney check-ups, bladder and bowel management, relationship and sexuality counselling, and referrals.

After 11 years in the outpatient clinic, she finally decided to get serious about her degree; she quit her job and went to school. Her clinical work was recognized with an Award of Merit from the Canadian Paraplegic Association. "It was the nicest thing I'd ever received," she says. She also received a Nursing Excellence Award from the HSC, the first year it was given.

As she began her studies, she was offered a part-time position as a research nurse co-ordinator with Dr. Pat Nance. She leapt at the opportunity and has so far helped run several published studies: an evaluation of anti-spasticity drugs; a test of the efficacy of a drug to prevent osteoporosis; and most recently, her first paper as the primary author, an evaluation of 20 years of treating pressure ulcers at the centre. "It's a thrill to be published," says Orpha. "Research is very exciting." She's now working on two other research projects: one looking at drugs for urinary incontinence and another on sexuality. As a result of her research, she was able to obtain funding to develop a patient manual on preventing pressure ulcers. It's now distributed to all patients on the Spinal Cord Injury Unit and their caregivers. Over the past decade she has given many presentations and lectures to groups of students, patients and health care providers.

Orpha plans to continue working for another two years but is already anticipating her "freedom 55." She and her husband have built their dream retirement home at Lake-of-the-Woods and are spending every spare moment there. They had a boat specially built and enjoy fishing in the summer. Orpha hopes to do some furniture refinishing and do more yard and garden work. "I've already stacked enough wood for 15 years," she says, laughing.

*Paraplegic stems from the Greek word para, but quadriplegic's roots are Latin. In the interest of continuity, tetraplegic, another Greek-based word, is replacing quadriplegic.

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