

# Provincial Chief Nursing Officer

“Nurses are the heart and soul of our healthcare system,” says Vanessa Burkoski, the chief nursing officer for Ontario. “They’re the footsoldiers who represent the largest composition of healthcare providers. Nurses provide care, treatment and attention, and they’re at the patient’s side, 24/7 and 365 days of the year.”

Appointed in June 2007 as Chief Nursing Officer for the Province of Ontario, Burkoski’s principal job is to provide government with strategic advice on health and public policy issues from a nursing perspective. But, as she explains, “One of the most important parts of my job is to identify the priority nursing issues, to collaborate with nursing stakeholders, to understand what the healthcare environment is all about for nurses, and to be able to build nursing policy and strategy that ensures that nurses can deliver the kind of quality and safe care that they want to deliver.”

In addition, Burkoski’s responsibilities include communicating the importance of the profession of nursing to the healthcare system, and ensuring that funding, resources and education meet the needs of nurses now and into the future. “We have to build a sustainable nursing workforce. You do that through policy that is directed at changes in the system. We have to build healthy work environments, work at recruiting new nurses and retaining those we have.”

Burkoski is a fierce advocate for nurses and her profession. “We need to develop new models of nursing care delivery that satisfy nurses, that achieve quality and safety goals, and that enhance efficiency so that nurses don’t suffer burn-out.” Nurses have a tremendous impact on whether or not we have positive patient outcomes, Burkoski says. “It’s the nurses who pull it all together. We rely upon the nurses when anything happens in the system. During SARS, it was the nurses who made sure the patients were cared for, and that the processes and the systems were in place to minimize contamination. Whenever and wherever there are extraordinary circumstances, nurses play a critical role in resolving them.”

Burkoski has spent more than 23 years in the nursing profession. It was in her senior high school year, Burkoski first began to think about nursing as a career when her Italian immigrant grandmother had to go into the hospital for a serious injury. “My grandmother was such an important part of my life, and I felt that here I was, having to put her care in the hands of strangers.”

After taking her degree at the University of Windsor, her first job was as a Public Health Nurse, visiting both the elderly and families with young babies, and conducting pre-natal classes. A year later, she transferred to the Windsor-Essex County Health Unit. Her new position also involved home-visiting. She then worked in the Infectious Diseases Clinic. She started an HIV Testing Clinic at the Health Unit and worked with the local Catholic School Board to provide education for teachers about HIV infections. And she assisted various local committees, providing education on immunization and sexual disease prevention.

In 1989, she took a position with the Sandwich Community Health Centre, the first community health centre in Windsor. As Health Promotion Coordinator, she developed health promotion and prevention programs for the community.

She was a member of the AIDS Committee of Windsor and participated on the Board that established the Needle Exchange Program in Windsor; and, along with a colleague, developed the proposal to establish the HIV Care Clinic, which is now attached to Windsor Regional Hospital.

In 1995, while she was still at the Sandwich Community Health Centre, Burkoski started working on policies and procedures implementation for the Clinic. Meanwhile, she was accepted into the first class of the new Nurse-Practitioner Program at the University of Windsor. She then completed the University of Windsor’s Masters of Science in Nursing degree.

Subsequently, Burkoski was recruited by Windsor Regional Hospital as a Nurse-Practitioner in the Emergency Department. One fortuitous thing led to another, and she found herself manager of the Emergency Department,

and then, director of Emergency and Critical Care. She led the Emergency Team through a second accreditation process. She was then invited to become a CCHSA (Canadian Council of Health Services Accreditation) Survey Accreditor.

In 2005, while still at Windsor Regional, she started her doctorate at the University of Phoenix “because I wanted to be able to do more research.”

Her new job as Chief Nursing Officer brought her to Toronto in 2007 after a lifetime in Windsor and Amherstburg. She readily admits it took a while to adjust to living amidst the bright lights and noise of the big city. “I couldn’t sleep for two weeks. I thought I’d go crazy with all this noise.”

Since Burkoski first began her career, she’s seen a lot of changes, some superficial, and others far more profound. “When I first graduated in the early 1980s, we could be close to our patients. Our core practice was to establish therapeutic relationships with our patients, to be able to communicate with them, understand them - really deliver patient-centred care.”

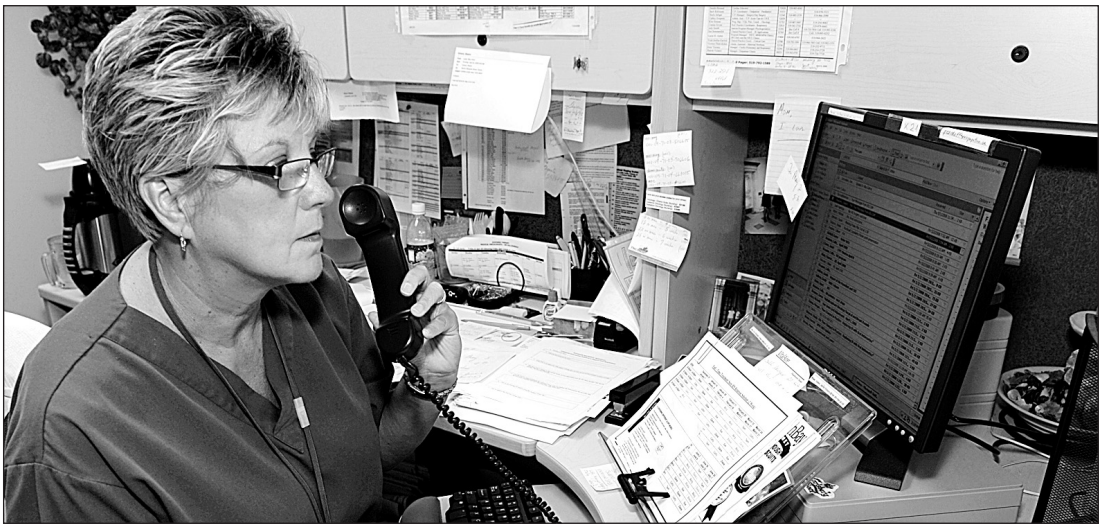
“It was a continuous care process. At that time, there was a simplicity to the system that’s been lost.” But the complexity of the modern healthcare environment has created so many new activities for nurses that they are challenged to maintain that close nurse-patient relationship.

And this sense of losing the nurse-patient relationship matters, says Burkoski, because it goes to the heart of what motivates nurses, and what represents “job satisfaction” for nurses.

“To my mind, that’s the underlying reason why some nurses have become dissatisfied. Because they can’t satisfy the essential core reason they had for entering the profession of nursing in the first place, which is to be close to their patients. It’s a frustration. My job now is to help reduce those barriers and bring nurses back closer to patients. Which I hope will ultimately give them more job satisfaction.”



Vanessa Burkoski, chief nursing officer for Ontario.  
Photo: Courtesy University of Windsor



Sharon Vickers, RN, manager of the outpatients clinic, cancer centre in her office at Windsor Regional Hospital.  
Photo: Ed Goodfellow - Special to The Star

## Long-time nurses speak with passion

CONTINUED FROM / F2

*What are the toughest challenges?*  
Helping people deal with their losses. It takes compassion and empathy.

*What are you most proud of?*  
I’m most proud of what the seniors have been able to accomplish with me — intermingling with each others’ groups, meeting their own needs, helping them be more knowledgeable on personal and community issues. Providing them with the opportunity to meet other people. It’s not a job. In fact I tell my clients not to let anyone know how much I love my job or I won’t get paid!

*What was your most vivid experience?*  
Working with marginalized clients. Whether age 15 being abused, someone caught up in addiction, or seniors who don’t have enough. When you work with seniors, they die. You deal with their grief and then your own — it’s on a professional level but you help them live well and then die well.

*What advice would you give to someone just starting out?*  
What I try to teach is to be compassionate, to listen. It’s not all about the clinical and what you learn in a book — you bring yourself to the job.

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**SHARON VICKERS, RN,** Windsor Regional Cancer Centre

*When did you enter the nursing profession?*  
I graduated in 1975.

*Why did you decide to become a nurse?*  
I always wanted to be in a giving profes-

sion — it suited me. I never thought I’d be working so long! Now that I’m in management, I don’t do hands-on nursing care but I manage a group of very competent and experienced nurses. I like to give them the tools to do their best job for their unique patient population. It can be so stressful so it amazes me that some nurses stay so long in oncology. There is an emotional component in dealing with a cancer patient.

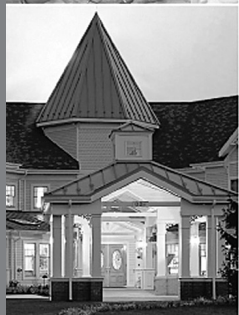
*What have you loved most about it?*  
When I walk by a patient for whom I was a primary nurse and they comment on something that occurred between us, I get emotional. I miss that patient contact. It’s amazing — they are so grateful for the care that we provide.

*What are the toughest challenges?*  
For managing, our biggest challenge is the aging population of nurses — how to keep them on the job. As a nurse, when you see you can’t help a patient and there will be no improvement. The ability to deal with that improves as you get older. I see these patients year in and out; their strength is so amazing. They keep going. A lot of oncology nurses would probably say they get their strength from their patient.

*What are you most proud of?*  
When I went back and got my degree in nursing. I did it while working full-time. But it was very beneficial for me.

*What was your most vivid experience?*  
It always comes back to a few patients who stand out and their strength. One who was young with a young family — he struggled so much but did what he could to stay alive. I don’t go to many funerals but I had to go to his.

*What advice would you give someone just starting out?*  
Go after any opportunities you can to get the most experiences people.



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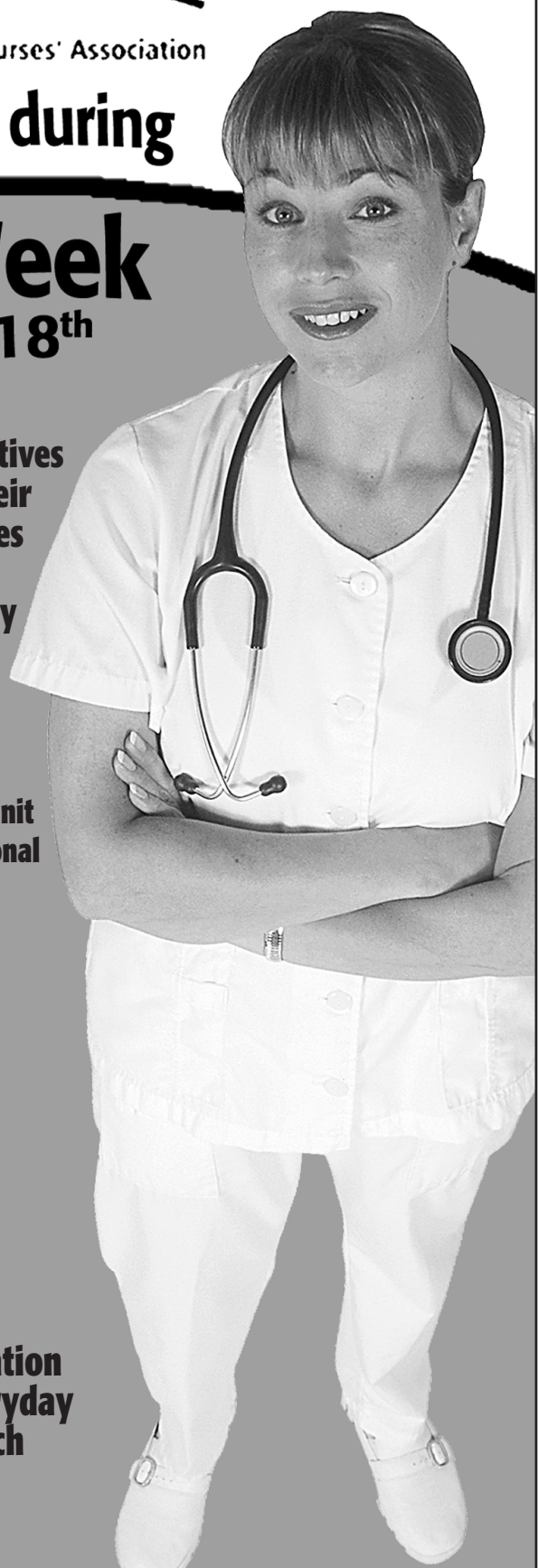
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Ontario Nurses' Association

**Celebrate nurses during  
Nurses' Week  
May 12<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>**

**Local 008 and Local 11 Executives  
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- Leamington District Memorial Hospital
- Windsor-Essex County Health Unit
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- Banwell Gardens
- Brouillette Manor
- Chateau Park Lodge
- Extendicare Southwood Lakes
- Heron Terrace
- Huron Lodge
- Sun Parlor Home
- Windsor Regional Hospital and Cancer Centre
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