

# 2021 NURSING ANNUAL REPORT



**UConn**  
HEALTH



### Message From the Chief Nursing Officer

If 2020 was all about the resilience and flexibility of our nurses and staff, 2021 was the year of extraordinary stamina and strength. In many ways, year two of the COVID-19 pandemic was harder than the first; after a challenging year of the unknown and the unimaginable, you, our steadfast and unwavering UConn Health nurses, kept pushing through another demanding and difficult year.

Staffing shortages were by far the biggest challenge of 2021. With every surge, our nurses faced extremely difficult challenges, this time managing with less permanent staff due to increased vacancies and continued traveler utilization. Hospitalizations rose at points throughout the year as the virus changed and became more infectious, and with that, many of our nurses, faculty, and staff contracted the virus themselves.

We saw your tirelessness and true grit in the units, and we worked hard to find ways to attract more staff back to the bedside at UConn Health — including nurses who had left the field or retired, travelers, and new graduates who were inspired by your incredible work on the frontlines in 2020.

I continue to be in awe of how each of you stepped up to the plate during this time, giving our patients the highest level of care and attention every day, 24/7. I saw your effort day in and day out, and from the bottom of my heart, I thank you for your toughness and dedication. Your hard work directly contributed to UConn John Dempsey Hospital's steady patient engagement scores and our extremely strong NDNQI

quality indicators. This illustrates that despite the challenges you faced, stellar quality of care was maintained over the course of the year.

Additionally, our professional shared governance boards, Clinical Excellence, Professional Advancement, and Research, have been making great strides working on initiatives critical to our patients, staff, and organization. Our Nursing Executive Board has also met, and I have been impressed with the reports from the shared governance board chairs on their progress.

As new variants emerge, every week brings about a new change, and we are all still settling into our new normal. Change is hard, and I know how important it is to identify new ways to focus on the wellness of our nursing staff. We are in the early stages of developing a nursing wellness program, and as we move into the next year, this will be a top priority. Through shared governance and our employee engagement survey, we need to continue to hear from you, our valued staff, as to how this initiative will move forward with your needs in mind. Continue to speak with your nursing leaders. That is how your voice is heard.

Our relationship with the UConn School of Nursing continues to be robust and collaborative. We have UConn School of Nursing professors conducting clinical research within the hospital and educating staff within our shared governance research committee. We continue to increase our clinical student rotations throughout the year while providing preceptorships supported by our advanced practice nurse practitioner staff.

As you will read in this report, through shared governance and professional practice, we secured more hover mats and a new hover jack for our nurses this year. We are also evaluating potential improvements to the nursing clinical ladder application process, encouraging more nurses to advance their clinical status here at UConn Health.

This year we celebrated the many accomplishments of our staff and Nightingales during Nurses Week, recognizing clinical excellence within nursing practice. Because of that hard work, UConn John Dempsey Hospital continues to improve patient outcomes and the quality of care administered to all of our patients.

I am tremendously proud of our successes this year. The commitment, compassion, and determination I saw in all of you make UConn Health a leader within the profession of nursing.

In appreciation,

**Caryl Ryan, MS, BSN, RN**

Chief Operating Officer, UConn John Dempsey Hospital  
Chief Nursing Officer  
Vice President for Quality and Patient Care Services



UConn Health couldn't be a successful health system without their daily high-quality care, patient safety, and clinical excellence. Their nursing excellence has even led to our third consecutive top 'A' highest patient safety rating by the national Leapfrog Group, a health care safety watchdog organization.

Indeed the past few years living with COVID-19 have been extraordinarily challenging for all of us, especially our nurses on the front lines of patient care rising to the greatest public service challenge of a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. No matter what, they have triumphed, and continue to serve as a pillar of strength for our organization, our patients, and our communities with their relentless resilience, dedication, and grace.

My many thanks to our Chief Nursing Officer Caryl Ryan, MS, BSN, RN, for her incredible leadership and service including in her recently appointed role of Chief Operating Officer for UConn John Dempsey Hospital. We commend Caryl, all our nurse leaders, and the entire fleet of nursing personnel at UConn Health for their commitment to the nursing profession and first and foremost our patients.

Our nursing staff is a true team working together every day to make a difference in the lives of our state's people and patients. Enjoy reading this annual report that reflects this very fact.

Sincerely,

**Dr. Bruce T. Liang**  
Interim Chief Executive Officer, UConn Health  
Dean, UConn School of Medicine

### Message From the Chief Executive Officer

As UConn Health's interim CEO and a practicing cardiologist, I know first-hand how critically important nursing excellence truly is for patient safety, patient outcomes, and our organization's ongoing success.

Our nursing staff is a tremendous source of pride for UConn Health and the State of Connecticut. In fact, our nurses are the backbone of our state's only public academic health system. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all our nurses, nurse leaders, APRNs, and CRNAs at UConn Health for all they do to keep Connecticut healthy.



What does it mean to be a nurse? The American Nurses Association defines nursing as "the protection, promotion, and optimization of health and abilities, prevention of illness and injury, alleviation of suffering through the diagnosis and treatment of human response, and advocacy in the care of individuals, families, communities, and populations." This is a tall order, but UConn Health nurses unequivocally fulfill these comprehensive, challenging, and critical roles.

But your role goes beyond direct patient care. You help fulfill our mission of being an academic medical center. You teach the next generation, ensuring a workforce for tomorrow. You contribute to scientific discovery through research and performance improvement.

Nursing has been instrumental in helping us achieve our awards and distinctions, such as a Leapfrog Hospital Safety Grade "A" again and a CareChex Top 10% in the nation for patient safety. But, more importantly, patients choose to come to UConn Health for their care and want to keep coming back to UConn Health in large part because of their nursing care.

As Assistant Dean for Education, I thank you all for your contributions to teaching. As Chief Medical Officer, I thank you for your continued excellence in clinical care. Thank you for being a nurse and, especially, a UConn Health nurse.

**Scott Allen, MD**  
Chief Medical Officer  
Assistant Dean for Education

### Message From the Chief Quality Officer

On behalf of the Medical Staff, I want to extend our profound gratitude to all the nurses at UConn Health. As we persevered through a second year of COVID, the nursing staff has continued to demonstrate their resiliency in providing the best care for our patients. The pandemic has highlighted the critical role nursing plays in the care of all our patients across the continuum. Whether in the inpatient or ambulatory setting, providers, patients, and their families rely on nursing to help achieve our common goal of superior care.



### Message From the Dean of the University of Connecticut School of Nursing

I know many of you felt the same immense hope and joy that I did in early 2021 when vaccines were made available to health care and frontline workers, then immunocompromised individuals, and eventually the general public. I could breathe a sigh of relief knowing that all of you and our School of Nursing students would be safe. Many of you even taught our students how to administer vaccines to others in the community. I know they are grateful to you for your guidance and proud of their small part in fighting this pandemic.

While “normal” seems to return slowly each day, I cannot thank you enough for your steadfast mentorship of our students. Not only were you dedicated to your patients, but to our students as well. Whether there was a COVID-19 surge or a switch from online to in-person learning (and back again), our nearly 400 undergraduates could always count on their clinical training and your leadership. Those of you who precepted our advance practice students motivated and inspired them as they juggled their studies and careers. You made a difference in the lives of all the students through your generosity of spirit, your patience under the most trying of circumstances, and by showing them what it means to be a professional nurse! My gratitude and respect for all of you are endless. Thank you for being wonderful partners as we all continue to serve the citizens of Connecticut.

**Deborah Chyun, Ph.D., RN, FAHA, FAAN**  
 Professor and Dean, School of Nursing  
 University of Connecticut

### Greatest Catch 2021: Nurses Flag Potentially Fatal Pump Programming Error

It took teamwork to recognize and fix a serious problem that could have had fatal results for patients at UConn Health.

CRNAs Dianne Murphy and David White from our Anesthesia Department are the winners of the UConn Health Greatest Catch of the Year for 2021.

In June of 2021, White was working in the operating room when he noticed the library on the Alaris IV pump had been programmed incorrectly. The settings for nitroglycerin were preprogrammed to dose mg/min instead of mcg/min, a significant difference in dosage that could have had grave consequences.

“That’s a thousand times of a difference. You could kill someone almost immediately. Instead of titrating three micrograms, you’d be titrating three milligrams, which you would never, ever do,” Murphy explains. “Because I’m the pharmacy liaison for our department, he alerted me to the problem.”

Murphy immediately called the safety pharmacist, and 10 additional Alaris IV pumps were pulled from the operating rooms to be reprogrammed. Quick action earned Murphy and White the Greatest Catch of the Year award, designed to recognize UConn



Dianne Murphy, CRNA

Health staffers who report a near-miss event or safety situation that could have resulted in patient harm.

Patient Safety and Quality Department staff review all Safety Intelligence (SI) reports that are submitted and identify the Good Catches. Each month, the Safety Coach CHAMP to Champions Committee vote and determine the Best Catch of the Month, and at the end of each year, they vote to determine a Greatest Catch of the Year. This program emphasizes the importance of identifying and reporting concerns so that together we can provide the safest environment possible for both patients and staff.

“This was totally a team effort,” notes Murphy. “For the pumps that were in service, one of my colleagues took them out of the OR so people wouldn’t use them, and she flagged them until they were reprogrammed.”

An exemplary flow of communication was critical in preventing a potentially fatal error.

“If Dave hadn’t communicated this, it would have remained the same,” she notes. “And nobody would have ever known the difference until they went to use it and potentially made a fatal error. So communication is key.”

Because White sounded the alarm, cooperation among the disciplines was set into motion to fix the problem. Murphy, who says she’s humbled by the experience, stresses the importance of UConn Health’s commitment to safety and accepted the award during Nurses Week with hard-working nurses everywhere in mind.

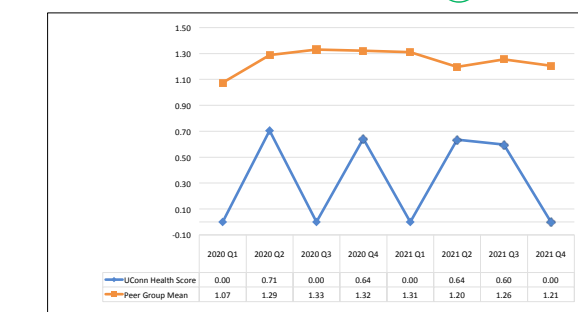
“When I got hired, Dr. Thomas Yasuda told me that as long as we’re doing the right thing, he can stand by us 100 percent,” she says. “I took those words to heart. Every day when I show up at work, I want to do the safest possible thing, and I know that he will stand behind me. Even if it means stopping the line for something.”

### Major Strides in Reaching Zero CAUTI and CLABSI Goal

Hospital onset central line-associated bloodstream infections (CLABSI) and catheter-associated urinary tract infections (CAUTI) have been trending down since the epidemiology nurses took aim at central line-associated bloodstream infections and catheter-associated urinary tract infections by creating a specific role in 2018 to combat them both.

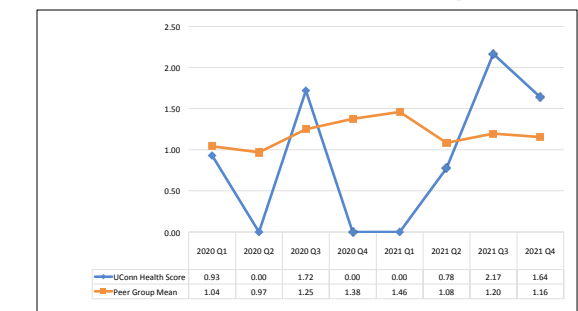
Epidemiology nurses Lisa Gentile, BSN, RN, and Shiela LaFleur, BSN, RN, have provided one-on-one education and much more, partnering with doctors, residents, and nurses to see where they might be able to intervene.

### Central Line Associated Blood Stream Infections per 1000 Central Line Days



Number of quarters UConn Health JDH OUT-PERFORMED the comparison NDNQI peer group mean (academic medical centers): 4 to 7 quarters (green checkmark), 3 quarters (yellow exclamation mark), 0 to 2 quarters (red X).

### Catheter Associated Urinary Tract Infections per 1000 Catheter Days



Number of quarters UConn Health JDH OUT-PERFORMED the comparison NDNQI peer group mean (academic medical centers): 4 to 7 quarters (green checkmark), 3 quarters (yellow exclamation mark), 0 to 2 quarters (red X).

“We have been participating in the general orientation to talk about CAUTI and CLABSI surveillance and prevention,” says LaFleur, who moved to another position at UConn Health in 2022. “Our flyers or pocket guides are given to nurses so they can refer to them to help them in their daily care of patients.”

Gentile noted that one of the biggest wins this year regarding CLABSI was changing the documentation in Epic. The day dressings are changed was added, which helped fine-tune the day a dressing is due to be changed again. This project began in 2021 with the Quality Assurance department and the Epic Building Team.

“When the nurse selects the transparent dressing and then selects the day that they are changing it, Epic will automatically populate the day it’s due, which has been great,” explains Gentile. “This was really a fantastic win because during our rounds we were seeing that there was a lot of confusion with nursing in terms of when a dressing change was due for a central line.”

This update prevented dressings from being changed too early or late, which can put patients at risk for CLABSI.

# INSPIRATION



To combat CAUTI, the nurses worked hard to partner with the bedside nurses to observe what they're putting in the documentation in terms of their straight catheterization and bladder scanning before a Foley is put in, and making sure that the patient hasn't failed their voiding trial.

With the addition of a lot of new graduates, education has been key. "Encouraging nurses to ask for removal as soon as they think it's appropriate. Not waiting for the doctor to say, 'Hey, go ahead and do this,'" Gentile says.

This education has been very well received. "I've had some nurses come up to me and say, 'I put that the patient didn't have an indication, I reached out, and they said we could take the Foley out.' So it's really great when you're hearing nurses are being empowered," adds Gentile.

Nancy Dupont, CIC, MPH, BSN, RN, Nursing Director of Epidemiology, says Gentile and LaFleur have made remarkable changes in CAUTI and CLABSI policy and clarified many points of care through those policies.

It's also important to note that rates of infection increased in general during the pandemic at most hospitals, but UConn Health maintained a low infection rate.

"We attribute the majority of that success to the epidemiology nurses' role. We continue to follow best practices. We continue to monitor and observe the elements of how to care for a central line and Foley," says Dupont. "We really want to partner with our coworkers and be a support for them. That's our goal. Through that support, we've seen improvements in practice."

Having a resource like Gentile on the floors has contributed to the downward trend of infections and more. "We're on the floors every day, and we're talking to these nurses during the device rounds - and they don't just ask us about central lines, they're asking us about all kinds of things," Gentile explains. "It's really just being present and being a resource for the nurses. I do think that that has factored into our improved rates."

## **Epidemiology: Patient Vaccines, Monoclonal Antibody Therapy, and So Much More**

Two extremely challenging and important initiatives that UConn Health's epidemiology nurses took on would dominate their worlds in 2021: counseling the hospital's inpatients about COVID-19 vaccines and counseling those eligible for monoclonal antibody therapy.

While both tasks were difficult and large in scope, what the department's nurses remember most was the valuable interactions these projects fostered.

"This allowed us to actually enter the patients' rooms and have conversations with them and their families," says Nancy Dupont, CIC, MPH, BSN, RN, Nursing Director of Epidemiology, about coordinating this vaccine rollout. "They expressed a lot of fear and questions, and at times the consults took quite a while. Part of the challenge was arranging, having the vaccine there at a certain time so a nurse could be available, and then monitoring the patient for any potential side effects."

The team counseled some 300 inpatients about the vaccines while simultaneously working to get life-saving monoclonal antibody therapy to people who were eligible.

Beginning in December of 2020, Rachel Crosby, MSN, RN, CIC, and Kate Falotico, BSN, RN, CIC, took charge of the monoclonal antibody therapy counseling effort, connecting by phone with approximately 600 COVID-positive patients over the course of 14 months, to help them through the sometimes complicated process.

"We would call patients all day, into the evening, and on weekends because we didn't want patients to miss out. It was quite an amazing time," says Falotico. "You develop a relationship with these patients. They really appreciated having a human to talk to."

The department also took ownership of the project of fit testing for N95 respirators worn by the hospital's more than 2,000 employees — a project previously handled by Environmental Health and Safety. With help from IT, a new database was created to streamline the process better.

"The goal is for all of UConn Health's staff, our students that we see, and any contractors to be able to go online and get their fit testing and also see when they're due for their yearly OSHA requirement or pull up records for any reason," says respiratory program coordinator Erica Gomez, BSN, RN.

Even with all this added responsibility, "The team really hit the ground running," Dupont says, "Everybody was involved with fit testing once it had been given over to us on October 1."

Lisa Gentile, BSN, RN, and Shiela LaFleur, BSN, RN, continued to thrive in their roles preventing CAUTI and CLABSI, the two most common hospital-associated infections.

Also having an impact this year was Dr. Julian Ford, Ph.D., ABPP, who made it his mission to go to the inpatient units and be a listener for the frontline staff who had been through so much in that first pandemic year.

Twelve "Resilience" sessions occurred in 2021 prior to the Omicron surge, during which staff was open and emotional about the burnout, stress, and strain they were feeling at work. These confidential listening sessions were a way to facilitate healing and offer support in the face of the most difficult recent past.

"He is a true resource for the staff, and to have somebody specifically interested in the nurse's wellbeing is just a really positive thing," says Dupont. "He really put the focus on wellbeing and care of self."

The feedback was tremendous, and Ford has been invited back to the units in 2022.

### **Nurse Practitioner Finds a Cost-Effective Solution to Air Quality Problem Facing Patients**

Marina Creed knew she had to do something. With a steady stream of terrified patients looking to her for guidance on how to stay healthy — and in some cases, survive — with the threat of deadly Delta looming, she was compelled to do something tangible to help.

"Many of my patients are educators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and cafeteria workers in schools, and they had all expressed significant concern that they were going into the school year with Delta raging. They were very concerned about the safety of their workplace," Creed, a neuroimmunology nurse



**Marina Creed, APRN, FNP-BC, MSCN**

practitioner at the UConn Health Multiple Sclerosis Center, recalled. "I started looking into the mitigation measures in schools, and I found that the leading schools of public health strongly recommended portable air cleaners in classrooms."

On Twitter, she came across a cost-effective, real-world solution to indoor quality concerns. It was a prototype of the Corsi Rosenthal Box, a DIY air purifier that can be made in 30 minutes with just \$60 worth of supplies from a hardware store. It was shared by distinguished atmospheric chemist Kimberly Prather, Ph.D., an aerosol expert, who had built 250 portable air-cleaning units with her students at UC San Diego.

What happened next would be a multidisciplinary effort by several departments at UConn Health, including the School of Engineering, School of Nursing, School of Medicine's Department of Public Health Sciences, and the Jackson Laboratory for Genomic Medicine.

"I asked them if they would be interested in a university-wide project, studying these boxes, maybe running a couple of experiments, and then creating a pilot project where we build them and deploy them to schools," Creed said. "We'd gather some data and then teach the public — specifically the public schools — how to build these for themselves."

Creed, who is also a UConn 2021 Florence Nightingale award winner for her exceptional work during the pandemic, secured a \$10,000 grant from the Petit Family Foundation Haley's Hope and Michaela's Miracle to supply the materials for "Box-A-Thon" events and received \$700 of materials from Home Depot.

The teams quickly got to work. On December 4, UConn Health nurses, nurse practitioners, School of Nursing faculty, Nursing Director Sue Ellen Poyton, MSN, RN, and students built the first 100 units, which were deployed to elementary school cafeterias, where students were not yet eligible for vaccination. The School of Engineering began building and studying 100 units in their "Intro to Engineering" class. The School of Nursing at Storrs made 100 units, and the School of Medicine began building another 100.

The units have already been deployed to West Hartford Public Schools, Coventry Public Schools, and homeless shelters in Hartford.

"The goal is to get the knowledge of how to build these out to the public so that they can build them for themselves, rather than UConn becoming a manufacturing facility of these," she explained, adding that a website is currently being built by her team which will offer information on how teachers and students can build them together.

Creed and her team are working on a manuscript, which they hope to publish soon, that includes preliminary real-world data showing how well these units work inside a fully occupied classroom. It's been incredibly rewarding for Creed, as a nurse practitioner and a mother of a young child, to watch these different groups work together toward this important goal.

"It has been overwhelming how engaged all of the different schools at UConn are and that they're all rallying behind this cause and are looking to cut through bureaucracy to make a difference," she said. "It's energizing, it's empowering, and it gives me hope that we are going to have improved indoor air quality, which transcends infectious disease and is also a meaningful tool that will be deployed throughout Connecticut to combat COVID-19."

Next up in 2022: Creed is collaborating with an epidemiologist at Arizona State University, who is in close contact with the CDC, about potentially working with the CDC on a pilot program to monitor the effects of these units on COVID-19 spread in schools.

### **New Graduates Have a New Perspective on Nursing**

Never stop learning. That's what Pamela Souza, BSN, RN, tells her kids and grandkids all the time. She embodies that mantra better than most people.

Having spent the greater part of her adult life working in the restaurant industry before becoming a nurse last year at the age of 55, Souza's experience with customers uniquely informs this exciting new chapter of her life, which officially began at UConn Health in August.



# EXCELLENCE

“Working as a restaurant manager, as I did, you’re dealing with people all the time, and you may get a great customer, you may get a terrible customer, but in the end, you’re there to make that person happy,” Souza explains of her past profession. “In nursing, you’re there to comfort them in a way that they need to be comforted, on top of being taken care of medically.”

It took seven years for Souza to finish her degree – bartending and waitressing on the side – and now, working as a med surg nurse, Souza says she wouldn’t change a thing, except perhaps have made this career change 10 years sooner.

Finishing their degrees in the middle of the pandemic was a final hurdle none of the recent nursing graduates could have ever prepared for, but it definitely made them stronger.

“Most people don’t start their nursing careers in the middle of a global pandemic,” says Sara Adamczyk, BSN, RN, who works in the intermediate unit. “For me, it solidified that I do want to be a nurse. We learned so much. Nursing is constantly evolving. It’s part of our career.”

Adamczyk, who was a student tech in the float pool during the first wave, believes she emerged from this experience more resilient and with a clear view of just how important nurses are.

“Nurses are so vital. They’re essential in health care,” she says. “Not only being with the patient medically but just being there emotionally. There were times when patients weren’t able to see family members, and I was there at their roughest time. We’re there by their side – nurses are the ones most at the bedside.”

Cameron Kurkul, BSN, RN, also experienced that firsthand in the ICU where he arrived in July. He remembers how heartbreaking it was caring for two COVID-positive patients, a mother and son. When one passed away, it was hard to tell the family that they couldn’t be by the bedside.

“We couldn’t even let them in the room,” Kurkul, 23, recalls. “It’s very hard to explain to them that they have to say goodbyes from outside the room.”

A few months shy of his first anniversary at UConn Health, Kurkul says the connection he has with the nurses on his floor is already so solid.

“We’re all in it together. I definitely look to them for support and guidance, and they’re always there. I can always count on them,” he says. “They’ve been great in shaping me and helping me to become a nurse.”

Annamarisa Sudigala, BSN, RN, was honored to be the first new graduate to join Labor and Delivery in several years. She’ll never forget the road that took her there.

“Transitioning to the role of a nurse during a pandemic was hard at times as I didn’t get as much hands-on experience during nursing school because some clinicals were canceled due to COVID,” she says. “However, after a very thorough orientation and with my coworkers’ support, I feel like I really found my groove and my confidence as a nurse.”

Sudigala says she couldn’t imagine working anywhere else, and she’s “beyond grateful” to have started her nursing career at UConn Health with nurses who are now her “second family.”

The learning curve was steep, but all the new graduates rose to the occasion.

“You go in there all wide-eyed, thinking this is going to be great, and then you’re like, holy cow this is really hard! But exciting at the same time,” Souza says. “I was fortunate that UConn has a really great program.”

Halfway through her preceptorship, Souza was working with a critically ill patient who was struggling with a diabetes diagnosis when she received further confirmation that she had found her calling.



“He was very upset, and he didn’t know how to manage it,” she recalls. “At the end of that week, he gave me the most beautiful handwritten note thanking me for just encouraging him along the way. I cried. At that moment, I said, ‘This is why I did this. I know I’m in the right place.’”

### Connecting With and Engaging UConn Health’s Elderly Population

The challenge of reducing social isolation for elderly patients hospitalized during the COVID-19 pandemic was a focus of the Nursing Improving Care for Our HealthSystem Elders (NICHE) program in 2021. Since visitors were not allowed at the hospital at various points throughout the year, combating isolation was a significant problem along with other common problems for hospitalized elders.

Student volunteers — many from the Purposeful Visitor Program, a collaboration with UConn Allied Health Sciences undergraduates — were an ongoing source of companionship for those isolated by COVID-19 and for patients with dementia or delirium.

“The student volunteers focused on engaging patients in conversations and with activities that

were stimulating and fun,” said Rachel Meehan, MSN, APRN, ACNS-BC, who leads NICHE.

The volunteers used items from the therapeutic activity carts maintained by NICHE to comfort patients and keep their minds active. A donation drive for the carts was very successful and helped replenish the supply of magazines, puzzles, and activity books in different languages.

“These were very helpful in working with patients that don’t speak English,” Meehan explained.

Gianluca Arianna, an MD/Ph.D. candidate who plays music on a piano keyboard, once again performed holiday favorites and classical music for the patients via Zoom. With COVID numbers going up over the holidays, the music helped bring cheer and fostered a patient-staff connection.

“Many patients, families, and staff listened,” Meehan said. “One of the things the music does is help patients reminisce over fond memories. It also facilitates staff conversations with them.”

The Nursing Shared Governance Council’s focus on assistive devices to mobilize and safely ambulate

patients went hand-in-hand with the NICHE program. This entailed identifying and standardizing an equipment checklist with help from physical therapist Kim Silverman, who served as a consultant.

“Our goal is to prevent functional decline,” Meehan said. “In order to do that, we need certain tools and equipment. With a standardized assessment tool, we can determine patients’ mobility status, and then, we can use the proper equipment and interventions to mobilize them safely.”

Educating staff on how to use the equipment and establishing workflows before and after use of the equipment will be goals for 2022.

### Stroke Center: A Year of Growth and Continued Excellence

It was a landmark year. The UConn Health Stroke Center has continued to demonstrate state-of-the-art care for all patients receiving treatment for ischemic and hemorrhagic strokes. A collaborative multidisciplinary effort shaped the care of both current and future patients, locally and beyond.

Certified as an Advanced Primary Stroke Center since 2014, this year, the stroke team at UConn Health celebrated a huge achievement: earning the gold distinction of Advanced Thrombectomy-Capable Stroke Center.

Following advanced primary recertification by The Joint Commission in November, featuring a survey with zero citations — an almost unheard-of achievement — it was clear the center was functioning at a higher level. Outstanding quality of care and a palpable level of excellence were among the positive feedback noted by the commission’s surveyor.

After meeting all of the eligibility requirements for Advanced Thrombectomy Capable Stroke Center and a rigorous two-day survey, the center became the first Thrombectomy-Capable Stroke Center in the Hartford area and 1 of 4 hospitals in Connecticut to reach this elite status.

“[This] certification recognizes health care organizations committed to fostering continuous quality improvement in patient safety and quality of care,” Mark Pelletier, RN, MS, chief operating officer, Accreditation and Certification Operations, and chief nursing executive, The Joint Commission, said at the time. “We commend UConn Health for using certification to reduce variation in its clinical processes and to strengthen its program structure and management framework for stroke patients.”

“The continued growth and the development of the Stroke Center — which saw over 700 stroke admissions in 2021 — has inspired the team to continue achieving excellence for patients,” said



Jennifer Sposito, RN, MSN

Jennifer Sposito, RN, MSN, Stroke Coordinator, who also noted the addition of Stroke Nurse Navigator Brooke Medel in 2021.

In this role, Medel helped patients and their families seamlessly transition from acute inpatient stroke care to the outpatient setting. She did everything from scheduling outpatient appointments to running a support group to help encourage and educate stroke patients, among many other duties.

“She has been an amazing addition to our stroke team and is fully patient-focused,” said Sposito. “She transcends the traditional inpatient/outpatient role.”

Further solidifying the center’s excellence in clinical care, for the fifth year in a row, the Stroke Center received the American Heart Association’s Gold Plus, Target: Stroke Honor Roll Elite Award, the highest award a stroke center can win. It was awarded in May during National Stroke Awareness Month.

“We enthusiastically welcome the year ahead with the realization that collaboratively we will continue our upward trajectory, and by doing so, positively change the life of patients,” Sposito added. “Each department plays such a critical role. We have stroke champions from every department — from Radiology to Pharmacy to every single nursing unit. Our providers are so involved. That kind of support and drive for excellence is huge.”





# COMPASSION



## **Quality: Addressing Patient Safety With a One-on-One Approach**

The goal: to foster a culture where quality, safety, service, and improved performance are embraced by all members of the organization using a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach.

The method: getting out from behind the desk, heading to the units, and working one-on-one with nursing staff and managers to bring high-quality reliability tools to the bedside. The quality team — consisting of 12 staff at present — achieved that goal and then some in 2021 with remarkable flexibility.

“The unique thing about the quality department is that it’s made up of a variety of nursing staff, who have an extensive history in regard to nursing,” says quality director Michelle DeLayo, DNP, APRN. “They come into the Quality department with their focus on patient safety and quality outcomes, but they bring that history with them.”

They took their unique expertise and experience to the units, fully supporting all the nurses in identifying safety or quality concerns. “We asked them, ‘What do you think we can do better as an institution, for instance, to make things safer for our patients?’” says DeLayo. “We’re going to bring things to the bedside that people don’t always think about.”

One of the ways that occurred in 2021 was through the Apparent Cause Analysis (ACA) on the Road program, in which the quality team traveled to the clinical experts on inpatient floors to get their insight on a specific patient safety event in order to prevent similar events from occurring in the future.

In December, an oral chemotherapy medication was ordered for a patient being held in the Emergency Department for several days. Nurse Alexa Zborowski went to clinical nurse specialist Shannon Curtis with questions regarding administration as she was a new grad in orientation at the time.

Zborowski was seeking to validate and verify with Curtis, the clinical expert in the Emergency Department, before administering a medication that she was unfamiliar with. This is an example of using a high-reliability tool to keep our patients safe, and these tools are taught to all incoming staff via Safety Starts With Me education. One of the goals of the Quality department is to promote and sustain a culture of patient safety.

We recognized that one way to do that was to bring safety events to the sharp edge, meaning the people who work at the bedside who can provide their perspective on safety events and suggest corrective actions to mitigate the risk of these events from occurring in the future.

The example cited above triggered an ACA on the Road. Staff from Quality, the Emergency Department, Pharmacy, and the clinical nurse specialist from Oncology met in the Emergency Department to review the event. As a result, the process for administering oral chemotherapy medications in the Emergency Department was changed to make it safer for the patient.

Furthering that direct connection with staff to reduce errors and improve patient care was another effort by Trauma Coordinator Karl Schmidt, MBA, MSN, RN, who partnered with the Emergency Department’s frontline staff and the clinical nurse specialists to do an enhancement survey of UConn Health’s electronic medical record system (EPIC) to improve documentation compliance.

Two of the many documentation requirements for verification as a trauma center are obtaining a Glasgow Coma Scale (GCS) score within 30 minutes of patient arrival and using a flow sheet for activated trauma patients (in Epic, this is called the Trauma Narrator). Neither of these was happening consistently, with compliance below 60 percent.

To address this, Schmidt worked closely with the Emergency Department’s Shannon Curtis to evaluate the causes and find solutions.

Shift huddles and feedback from nurses would help them completely revamp the Trauma Narrator by creating a primary survey, which contains only the immediate assessments used to determine if a life-threatening condition exists. A secondary survey was added, which contains the full patient assessments arranged from head-to-toe, matching how nurses and medical providers actually assess trauma patients.

The new Trauma Narrator went live on September 15, and they saw an immediate increase in its use. “This was a great team effort and could not have been accomplished without everyone’s help,” Schmidt says. “The willingness of the ED staff to embrace the changes and improvements was the real key to their successful implementation.”

Many of the Quality Department’s efforts in 2021 had them partnering with frontline staff. “We’re facilitating organization-wide initiatives and partnering with these key people within the organization,” says Nurse Manager Terri Gillenwater, who is currently working on something similar with falls.

The Greatest Catch program is a program that we are particularly proud of. The Patient Safety and Quality Department staff review all Safety Intelligence (SI) reports submitted and identify those events that are a near miss and what the institution terms good

catches. The de-identified good catches from each month are reviewed by the members of the safety coach program, and the “Best Catch of the Month” is selected by a majority vote.

At the end of the year, the “Greatest Catch of the Year” is chosen out of the 12 Best Catch award winners, (see page 5) and both the Best Catch of the Month and the Greatest Catch winners are provided a monetary gift and institutional recognition. This program aims to motivate staff to speak up when they spot a potential safety event before it impacts a patient. The winners of the UConn Health Greatest Catch of the Year for 2021 are CRNAs Dianne Murphy and David White from our Anesthesia Department.

Always striving to provide innovative and excellent care for UConn Health’s patients meant lending a hand when needed. Quality team members were dispatched to multiple clinical areas when there was a staffing shortage in December and helped operate vaccination sites, providing vaccines to the inpatient hospital population.

When the hospital needs additional help, for whatever reason, the quality staff may be pulled into roles that take them away from their daily tasks. “They are team players,” note Gillenwater and Delayo, and “we’re very proud of them for that.”

### Clinical Excellence Shared Governance Board Improves Workflow With Additional HoverMatts® and More

Kara Parker, MSN, RN, and Tom Curtin, RN, identified a problem: HoverMatts® were rarely available when staff needed them. These important mats help transport patients where they need to go — from bed to stretcher to CAT scans, etc. — and not having this important equipment on hand delayed care and made transport harder on staff hospital-wide.

Parker and Curtin were charged with fixing this problem in their roles as co-chairs of the Clinical Excellence Shared Governance Board, in which they’re always looking for ways to improve workflow and promote a safer practice environment. That started with a pitch to upper administration at a town hall meeting.

“We said, ‘We need HoverMatts®. We don’t know where they’re going but they’re not on the units. Can we make a proposal to order more HoverMatts®?’” Parker said of the air mattresses.

Chief Nursing Officer Caryl Ryan was very receptive to the request, emphasizing how big of a deal this was. This got the ball rolling. HoverMatts® were ordered, and with them came their next project: obtaining a HoverJack®, another piece of equipment needed on the units.

The HoverJack® allows staff to safely lift individuals who have fallen, starting at ground level. Available for use in 2022, it will be centrally located at John Dempsey, and education will be provided on how to use it, where to store it, and how to clean it.

As you can imagine, the addition of these items has had a significant impact on how our nurses do their jobs. “It promotes workplace safety, not only with patients but with staff. The HoverMatt® allows you not to have to lift, pull, or carry, so it improves safe patient handling,” Parker says.

Their work didn’t stop there. The idea of Mandation Appreciation Vouchers was proposed and accepted. These meal vouchers were given to nurses who had been mandated to stay an additional four hours after a 12-hour shift in an effort to address a staffing shortage.

“It was happening a lot during COVID,” Parker says. “We recognize you are being told you have to stay, so go get a snack on us.”

Wheelchairs were also purchased for every in-patient unit to expedite discharges and transfers, so nurses were not relying solely on the transportation department, which is often backlogged with calls.

While much of the work of the Clinical Excellence Shared Governance Board was paused at the onset of the pandemic in 2020, 2021 was filled with impactful accomplishments.

### Professional Advancement Board Focuses on Updating Clinical Ladders Track

The pandemic has challenged all aspects of our staff, and the Professional Advancement Board, which has only been a working committee since 2020, is no different. Their meeting at the end of 2020 kept getting pushed out because of COVID until the first one of the year took place on April 8, 2021.

Despite this challenge, the role of this board remains the same: to support the educational needs and professional growth of our nurses and help them practice at the top of their scope, and, in turn, supporting the mission of UConn Health to establish itself as a Magnet facility.

Currently, the board has several initiatives of note in the pipeline. First, establishing a second track for clinical ladders is an exploratory initiative. Second, revising the original clinical ladders track, also an exploratory initiative, and third, establishing a relationship with the UConn School of Nursing to provide increased educational opportunities for the nurses at UConn Health.

They have submitted a proposal to work on the first initiative since meetings started up again. They are waiting for further guidance from the administration on next steps to move it forward.



Kara Parker, MSN, RN

# INTEGRITY

“Despite a pandemic and staffing shortages, which negatively affect attendance at meetings, we are most proud that we were able to get a written proposal together for administration to review, in hopes of updating the clinical ladders track,” says Dawn Carroll, RN, co-chair. “Our biggest challenge was and continues to be the need to have staff nurses (bedside nurses) participate and be able to come to meetings.”

To address this, Carroll and Andrea Yuliano, RN, co-chair, who left UConn in 2022, attended some of the 7 a.m. morning huddles on the inpatient floors to try to recruit and explain what the board has been working on. In December, at the nursing town hall meeting with Caryl Ryan, they presented to the staff, explaining what the board is and the important initiatives they’re working on.

“Nurses should know that by participating on this board, they are the voices of change and moving forward,” Carroll says. “Their voices can bring issues forward to the board to address the needs of bedside nurses and make a positive change. We need and value bedside nurses.”

## **RNs Work to Prevent Hospital Acquired Pressure Injuries (HAPI) and Total Number of Falls**

In 2021, UConn Health had excellent hospital-acquired pressure injury numbers and consistently scored below the national average for the number of hospital-acquired pressure injuries. It’s also important to highlight that the number of falls with gaps also declined in number.

The wound/ostomy RNs — a team headed by certified wound and ostomy nurses Tanya Paradis, MSN, RN, CWOCN, and Sarah Higley, BSN, RN, WCC — work diligently with staff nurses to prevent hospital-acquired pressure injuries and to help present on admission pressure injuries heal.

These nurses frequently monitor and assess the appropriate use of interventions to make sure interventions are being used on high-risk patients to prevent injury. In addition to seeing patients with formal wound RN consults, they also review a daily report of every documented wound on every patient in the hospital to identify any patient who would benefit from a wound RN consult.

The nurses on the inpatient units are dedicated to preventing pressure injuries and alerting the wound RNs of present on admission and hospital-acquired wounds so that treatment can be initiated. The staff nurses are empowered to place wound RN consults per protocol for patients with known or suspected pressure injuries and patients at high risk for developing pressure injuries (based on their clinical presentation and Braden Scale for Predicting Pressure Ulcer Risk).

Several nurses on the units, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and registered dietitians are involved in our Skin Champion Committee, creating a multidisciplinary team that attends quarterly meetings to discuss ways to improve patient care, help reduce the incidence of hospital-acquired wounds, and promote wound healing. The staff nurses on the committee serve as resources to other staff on their units and participate in unit-based education focused on wound care and pressure injury prevention.

They are also involved in the quarterly NDNQI skin prevalence rounds, helping to round on all of the units to assess every patient for the presence of pressure injuries and the appropriate use of pressure injury prevention interventions. Several of our skin champions are furthering their careers and moving on to APRN positions, so we continue to encourage nurses who are interested in wound care to join the Skin Champion Committee.

UConn Health looks forward to continuing to grow this committee, especially since having a strong group of diverse staff members on the units with wound care interest and knowledge is beneficial to keeping our

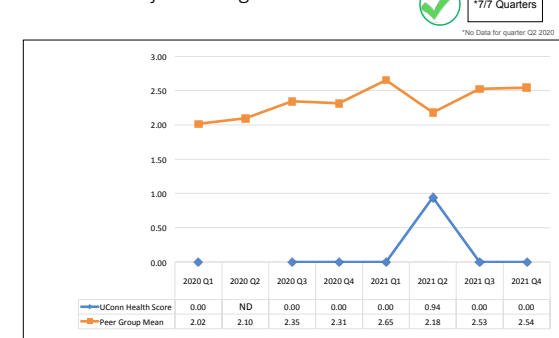


Total Patient Falls Per 1,000 Patient Days



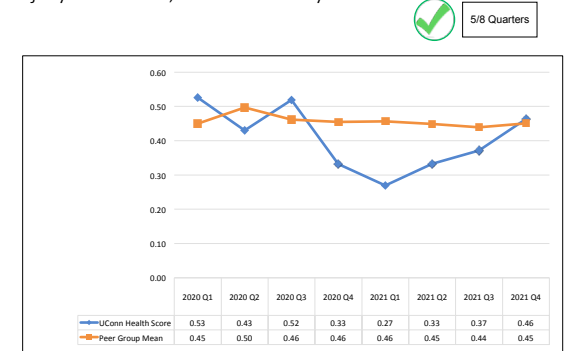
Number of quarters UConn Health JDH OUT-PERFORMED the comparison NDNQI peer group mean (academic medical centers) **4 to 7 quarters** **3 quarters** **0 to 2 quarters**

Percent of Patients with Hospital Acquired Pressure Injuries Stage 2+



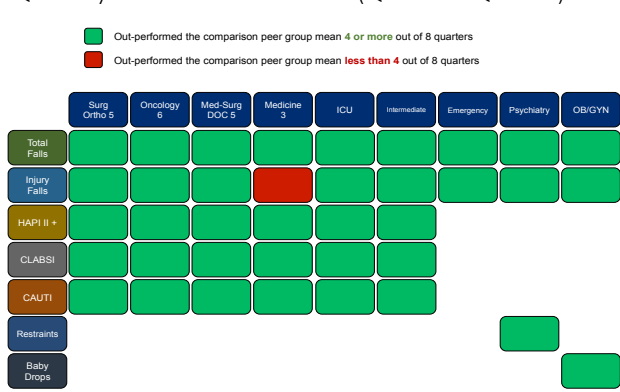
Number of quarters UConn Health JDH OUT-PERFORMED the comparison NDNQI peer group mean (academic medical centers) **4 to 7 quarters** **3 quarters** **0 to 2 quarters**

Injury Falls Per 1,000 Patient Days



Number of quarters UConn Health JDH OUT-PERFORMED the comparison NDNQI peer group mean (academic medical centers) **4 to 7 quarters** **3 quarters** **0 to 2 quarters**

Quarterly Indicator Unit Scorecard (Q1 2020 – Q4 2021)



debriefing after a fall,” she explains. “To have learning opportunities that translate to learning moments for the rest of the floor and any bedside staff at the hospital.”

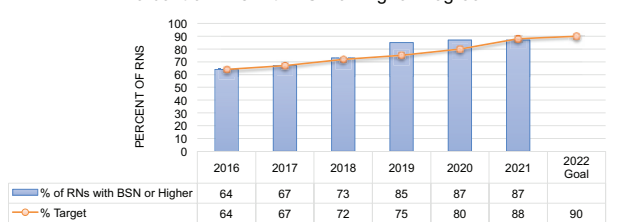
Higgins hopes to help foster educational moments when evaluating patients so that the care is entirely centered on each individual. “To decide the best way to prevent a fall with the person in the bed,” she says. “It’s not one size fits all. It’s important to think critically and evaluate what best suits the patient.”

### Strategic Goals for 2022-2023

#### BSN - Prepared Nurse

Initiative: Previous goal was to sustain or exceed the number of RNs with BSN or higher academic degrees in nursing which was at 87%.

UConn John Dempsey Hospital Percent of RNs with BSN or Higher Degree



Current: We have met our goal by sustaining 87% of our RNs with a BSN or higher degree in nursing. Partnership with the UConn School of Nursing allows tuition benefits to staff matriculated in a nursing program of study.

Target: Continue to sustain or exceed the number of RNs with BSN or higher academic degrees in nursing to a new high of 90%.

#### Professional Governance

Initiative: 2021-2022 goal was to inaugurate the Nursing Executive Board and establish a regular meeting schedule and attendance for the Clinical Excellence, Nursing Research, Professional Advancement, Nurse Manager, APRN, and Assistant Nurse Manager Boards.

Current: Unit based councils have been implemented. Most are active. Nursing Executive Board was inaugurated and has met with chairs from the other boards. Our membership for Clinical Excellence, and Professional Advancement has dwindled. With our high patient census, staff has found it difficult to get off the floors for meetings. Our staffing shortage has been improving, but we still have many staff positions filled by travel nurses who can not be professional governance members.

Target: Work on innovative measures to allow staff off their units to attend meetings. Begin a recruitment open house to entice new members to join the boards.

#### Nursing Research

Initiative: Previous 2021-2022 goals were to have one completed nursing research project by 2022, one manuscript accepted for publication in a professional journal, and to re-establish the Nursing Research Board.

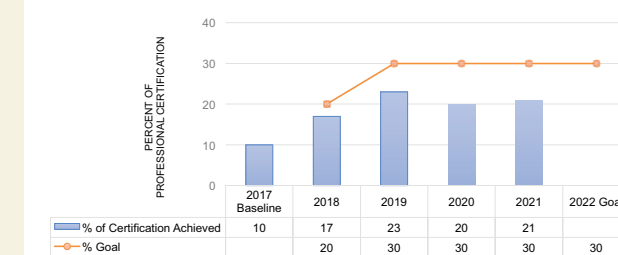
Current: Monthly Nursing Research Board meetings have been established with an engaged and consistent member base. While some members have carried over from the previous Nursing Research Board, many of the members now are new to research and to UConn Health. Board meetings in 2022 will focus on establishing a Spirit of Inquiry and understanding the fundamentals of nursing research. One nurse researcher group continues to pursue publication of their completed nursing research from a previous cohort of nursing research fellows.

Target: One manuscript accepted for publication in a professional journal. Continued monthly Nursing Research Board meetings with active participation from professional nurses across specialty area and educational levels. One designed, proposed, and IRB approved Nursing Research project in 2023.

#### RN Specialty Certification

Initiative: 2021-2022 goal was to increase the

UConn John Dempsey Hospital Percent of RNs with Professional Certification



percentage of RNs with professional specialty certification to 30%. Resources and support are available to RNs who are interested in attending certification review courses in preparation for taking certification exams.

Current: We have been unable to meet our goal, however, we did increase from 20% to 21% of RNs currently with specialty certification. The Professional Advancement Board is currently considering innovative measures to increase professional specialty certification numbers.

Target: Increase the percent of RNs with professional specialty certification to 30%.

#### RN Satisfaction and Engagement

Initiative: Previous goal was to make the Advisory Board’s Nurse Engagement Survey available to staff by 2021 with the continued goal of outperforming the mean on four of seven identified measures.

Current: Survey results using the Advisory Board’s Nurse Engagement Survey showed that we failed to outperform the mean in all seven categories measured. Opportunities for improvement were identified and plans are in place with the Professional Advancement Board to begin work on improving staff engagement.

Target: The Advisory Board’s Nurse Engagement Survey will be made available to RN staff once again in 2023 with the continued goal of outperforming the mean on four of seven identified measures.

#### Patient Engagement

Initiative: At the end of 2020 an initiative to improve our percentile ranking among CT hospitals in patient engagement scoring of nurse communication, specific to “Nurses treat with courtesy and respect” was undertaken. Target units were designated as UT3 and UT5. Nursing leadership rounding on all inpatients was increased.

Current: Our CT peer group percentile improved from a Q2 2021 hospital percentile rank of 15th to a 44th percentile ranking at the end of Q4 2021.

Target: Continue to see increases in our CT peer group comparison percentile to greater than the 50th percentile ranking by 2022.

## 2021 Professional Practice and Clinical Excellence by the Numbers for UConn Health

(Includes UConn John Dempsey Hospital, Hospital-based Clinics, and UConn Medical Group)

- 534 New employees attended Clinical Operations Orientation (COO)
- 521 Employees attended Safety Starts with Me
- 105 RNs attended General Nursing Orientation (GNO)
- 80 RN travelers were processed through central orientation
- 37 Non-RN travelers/contracted employees were processed through central orientation
- 911 Employees attended 2021 mandatory in-service sessions
- 377 Employees attended BLS sessions (4-hour sessions)
- 321 Employees completed Heartcode BLS
- 242 Employees attended ACLS classes - new, renewal, and skills checks
- 53 Employees attended Pediatric Advanced Life Support (PALS) new and renewal classes
- 27 Clinicians attended Trauma Nurse Certification Course (TNCC) - includes outside attendees
- 277 Employees attended Nonviolent Crisis Intervention (CPI) new and renewal classes
- 48 Employees attended two-day arrhythmia class
- 26 Employees attended Clinical Advancement Workshops for applicants and sponsors
- 105 Undergraduate nursing student placements occurred (traditional BSN and CEIN)
- 63 Graduate student placements occurred (PA and MSN/APRN)
- 8 Employees attended the Preceptor Workshop
- 44 Employees attended oncology in-service education programs

## 2nd Simon Award Recognizes Stroke, Multiple Sclerosis Providers

Successful patient outcomes don't happen without the hard work of teams. It's just that simple.

The second annual Dr. Richard Simon Excellence in Clinical Neurosciences Award recognized a team of multiple sclerosis providers and the stroke clinical program coordinator at the forefront of their fields in 2021, tirelessly working to achieve the best for their patients.



This prestigious award recognizes a "clinician, staff member, or student who exemplifies excellence in any area of the neurosciences at UConn Health." Simon, who has been on the UConn School of Medicine faculty for four decades, is a professor of surgery in the Division of Neurosurgery and UConn John Dempsey Hospital's chief of medical staff.

The awardees from the UConn Health Multiple Sclerosis Center were medical assistant Josauris Rivera, nurse practitioner Marina Creed, staff nurse Kim Fofana, clinical patient navigator Karen Nelson, and social worker Kristen Vavrek.

"Our team at the UConn Health MS Center was humbled to receive the Richard Simon award," says Creed. "It is a great honor to support people living with multiple sclerosis, and I know that together we will find a cure. From the bedside to the exam room to the community, we work tirelessly to improve the lives of people living with this disease and help to empower patients to live their best lives despite adversity."

Dr. Jaime Imitola, director of the UConn Health MS Center, acknowledged just how hard this team works for patients. "I have worked with and supervised many extraordinarily distinguished and talented neurologists and MS providers, and this team's leadership and actions during the pandemic for our MS patients are above and beyond," Imitola wrote in his nomination.

Nurse Jennifer Sposito, RN, MSN, was honored for her work in the UConn Health Stroke Center, nominated by Drs. Ketan Bulsara, Gracia Mui, and Sanjay Mittal.

"Her impact on patients, physicians, and the institution has helped pave the way for the unprecedented success of the stroke program," her nominators wrote. "Her feedback regarding hemorrhagic and ischemic stroke treatments celebrates the achievements of an ever-growing multidisciplinary team."

The UConn John Dempsey Hospital has been certified as a "Primary Stroke Center" by The Joint Commission, the American Heart Association, and the American Stroke Association since 2014, five months after Sposito moved to the Stroke Center. She joined UConn Health in 2012 as a critical care float nurse, and in 2016 she won a Nightingale Award for Excellence in Nursing.

"It was an honor to be recognized for all of the hard work, dedication, and loyalty to our stroke patients and Stroke Center through the years," Sposito says. "Our Thrombectomy Stroke Center has hit many milestones through my eight years as the stroke coordinator. Growing us from a non-Stroke Center to a Primary Stroke Gold Winning Stroke Center is a huge accomplishment. It is a dream that we have taken this Stroke Center to the next level to a Thrombectomy Capable Stroke Center as of December 2021."

Dr. Hilary Onyiuke, professor of neurosurgery and founder and co-director of UConn Health's Comprehensive Spine Center, leads the selection committee, which included leadership from the Division of Neurosurgery, the Department of Neurology, and the neuroradiology section of the Department of Radiology.

# CONGRATULATIONS AND SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR 2021 NIGHTINGALE AWARD RECIPIENTS



**Julie Burke, BSN, RN**  
Staff Nurse CN2, Radiation  
Oncology Nursing Unit



**Elaine Cournean, MSN, APRN-BC, ACHPN**  
Movement Disorders, Neurology,  
UConn Medical Group



**Rachel Crosby, MSN, RN, CIC**  
Infection Prevention Specialist,  
Epidemiology Department



**Ryan Massicotte, BSN, RN**  
Staff Nurse CN2, Medicine 3 Unit



**Kara Parker, MSN, RN**  
Staff Nurse CN3, Clinical Nurse  
Specialist, Intermediate Unit



**Wilfreda Tilley, MSN, RN, PCCN, CN3**  
Assistant Nurse Manager,  
Intermediate Unit

A former reporter, writer, and senior editor for People magazine and CBS News, Amy Jamieson is a freelance health, lifestyle, and entertainment writer based in Collinsville, Connecticut.

# NURSING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE MODEL

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263 Farmington Avenue, Farmington, CT 06030  
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