

## To Your Health!

By Judy Hargis, P.A., and Audeen Wagner



In this column I would like to reflect on healthcare, past and present, and to pay tribute to a person who represented all that has been lost in our current system.

Healthcare used to mean personal care. A provider knew his/her patients, their histories, their challenges and provided care to generations of families. They had relationships with their patients. A far cry from clinics today where you may see a different provider each time you have an appointment. A world where the clinic buzz words are now busy, production, bottom line, liability, coding and where patients are referred to as "customers." It is true that we have great technology and medical knowledge has grown tremendously. At the same time, continuity and access to care are

becoming a luxury, 47 million people are without healthcare and that number is growing.

This brings to mind Laura Nichols, a Physician Assistant who had tremendous impact on the community of Vernonia. She came to Vernonia in 1994. She was the only healthcare provider available during a time when the clinic was holding on by a thread. Carolyn Keasey recalls how frustrating it was to not know from week to week if there would be a practitioner to serve patients in the community. Carolyn remembers how Laura saved the clinic. When the flood of '96 came and the clinic was damaged, Laura worked tirelessly with the local community board to help forge an agreement with Providence to rebuild the clinic. She felt strongly that the community deserved a quality clinic so there would be access to care for everyone, and she was determined to make it happen.

She loved Vernonia. She was completely committed to the community and the clinic. She made herself available 24/7. She took phone calls, made house calls, and made herself accessible even when she was on vacation. Jeanette Doherty recalls how Laura would stay at the clinic late at night helping a patient through a difficult time. Sue Blair remembers her as no different as a neighbor, always there for anyone who needed her help. When I accepted a position at the clinic, I came to Vernonia to spend the day with Laura. She wanted to show me around. What stands out about that day is that it included a road trip to Scappoose, where she picked up a prescription for a patient and paid for it out of her own pocket. When we arrived home, a patient had left a plate of food on the front porch of her home. It was their way of saying "thank you." She was always available to help anyone in need. She was an amazing person with a rare commitment to the well-being of others. If it were possible, she would still be practicing today. Even though she lives in Rockaway beach now, a big piece of her heart will always remain in Vernonia.

I recently read an article about a physician who made a decision to leave a busy practice and find a way to go back to practicing medicine the way she had envisioned when she went to medical school. She discovered that it was possible to set up a small clinic, care for her patients the way she had intended and still make a reasonable living. She wrote an article titled "Is Busy Good?" She felt we should stop pretending that it is and get back to practicing medicine with the focus on our patients not the bottom line.

I have recently discovered a few other healthcare providers taking this same path. I hope this movement continues. What healthcare needs are more people with the compassion,  
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Laura Nichols, P.A.

## Do you know how to help prevent osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis – a disease that causes bones to become fragile and break – is a real threat for more than 44 million Americans, or 55 percent of those over the age of 50, according to the National Osteoporosis Foundation. While the disease typically affects older Americans, it can strike at any age.

May is national osteoporosis awareness and prevention month. In recognition of this timely awareness month, Kent State University College of Nursing professors Dr. Peggy Doheny and Dr. Carol Sedlak – who have conducted extensive osteoporosis research – share risk factors, symptoms and tips to help reduce the risk of osteoporosis and low bone mass.

While everyone is at risk for osteoporosis, certain individuals and lifestyles are more susceptible to the disease than others. These risk factors include:

- Being female
- Having a family history of osteoporosis
- Being Caucasian
- Experiencing estrogen deficiency as a result of menopause
- Smoking
- Maintaining an inactive life style
- Having a low calcium diet
- Having specific medical conditions such as anorexia nervosa, hyperthyroidism or inflammatory bowel disease.

While women experience osteoporosis more often, two million men have it and 12 million are at risk. "In fact, men 50 years of age and older have a higher risk of a fracture from osteoporosis than developing prostate cancer," said Dr. Doheny.

"If someone is at risk for osteoporosis, they should talk with their healthcare professional about getting a bone density test," Doheny added.

"While Medicare will cover a bone density test scan at age 65 for women and 70 for men, this is often too late. In our recent research, we found 58 percent of postmenopausal women ages 50-65 who participated in the study had experienced significant bone loss and about 50 percent of men 50 years old and younger had experienced compromised bone density."

Osteoporosis is often referred to as a silent disease because 75 percent of people with the disease are not aware they have it. In fact, symptoms are not present until you break or fracture a bone. "People do not realize a bone fracture or break is actually a bone attack," said Dr. Doheny.

Prevention for osteoporosis starts at a young age by taking enough calcium and vitamin D to build strong bones. About the age of 20, the average woman has acquired approximately 98 percent of her skeletal mass.

"This is precisely why it is important to bank the bone when you are young," says Dr. Doheny. "You cannot increase your bone density once you lose it; however, you can maintain the bone density you have when you get older by taking calcium and vitamin D and getting about 30 minutes of exercise a day."

Osteoporosis is preventable. Ways to prevent osteoporosis include:

- Increase dietary calcium (1200mg over the age 50) and vitamin D3 (1,000 IU)
- Exercise, including weight bearing activity (30 minutes 5 times/week), resistive exercises (2-3 times/week), balance exercises (daily)
- Do not smoke
- Request a bone density test from your healthcare professional.

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