



E-book

Delivering the personal touch:

Stories from the front lines of senior resident care



How Optum clinicians are helping members get the care they need, on their terms

Keeping residents happy, healthy and in their homes is the goal of every senior living community. And achieving success lies largely with the caregivers on the front lines – those working day in and day out to deliver personalized, holistic care.

Under the Optum care model, we build personal relationships with patients and families to ensure seniors live their final years with the care they need, on their terms.



From the ER to protecting the vulnerable

Meet Tara Rechtenbaugh Carroll

Nurse Practitioner
Colorado
Optum, since 2017

Tara Rechtenbaugh Carroll got into health care to save lives. But after 20 years of working in the emergency room, she's discovered the real reward is in helping seniors navigate their final years.

After following her older sister and mentor into nursing, she began her career in cardiac critical care at Good Samaritan Hospital in Lafayette, Colorado. There, she spent 13 years in the catheterization lab, sedating patients before lifesaving heart procedures.

She loved the intensity – and personal fulfillment – of working in that acute care setting. But eventually, she said, the long hours and middle of the night calls “just kind of wore on me.”

“We were saving people, but I was at an impasse,” she said.

So once again, she followed in the path of her sister, who moved from hospitals to working in senior communities as a nurse practitioner for Optum.



After working part-time on weekends at one of the communities where her sister worked, Carroll said she discovered that she really wanted to work with seniors, because “there’s no one more vulnerable than the elderly.”

She joined Optum as a nurse in 2017, and went back to school to become an Optum nurse practitioner in 2022.

“It’s funny, because when I was working in the cath lab, I had no desire to go back to school,” Carroll said. “But then once I got into this area, it just made me want to be able to do more.”

She admits the transition from lifesaving critical care to medicine that is focused more on end of life wasn’t always easy though.

“For 20 years it was all about, ‘I need to save this person. I need to save this person,’” she said.

After losing one of her first patients to pneumonia, she was upset that she hadn’t been able to do more. That’s when her supervisor reminded her that she was used to saving people, rather than letting them go.

While letting go is still difficult, Carroll said her favorite part of the job is being able to spend the time she needs to build real relationships with patients and their families, and provide the support and information they need to navigate what are often complex disease trajectories.

“I feel like this is nearing the end of their life and not a lot of people care,” Carroll said. “I want them to know that there is somebody that cares about them.”

“

**There is no one
more vulnerable
than the elderly.”**

– Tara Rechtenbaugh Carroll
Nurse Practitioner, Optum

For instance, she tells the story of getting a new patient, who was dying. She called the patient's husband to explain that his wife only had about 2 months to live, and to discuss her end-of-life care. "He paused, then said 'thank you,' because no one else had told him what was really going on," Carroll said.

Now, she said, rather than responding to emergencies, her reward comes from "helping members and their families through their final years, days or months, as they wish.

"I always ask my new patients, 'What's the best way I can take care of you?' Carroll said. She then has the hard but critical talks with them about advanced, long-term planning.

"Now it's more helping them through their process and helping the family through the process," Carroll said. "It's tough, but I really like the quality time that I get to spend with them. I make a difference and that fills my bucket."



Passing the torch – and the wisdom

Meet Patricia Chace

Medical Director
Rhode Island
Optum, since 2010

Dr. Patricia Chace has been delivering care to seniors for more than 40 years. During that time, she's seen a lot of changes in elder care, one of the most significant being development of the Optum care model that brings care directly to residents of senior living communities.

Formerly a primary care physician with her own practice in Rhode Island, she always had a large number of senior patients.

“I came to love that age group,” she said.

But during her early years, her patients from senior communities had to come to her, regardless of whether they had transportation, mobility or other challenges.

“Visiting them where they live wasn't something that we were doing back then,” Chace said. “And I felt disconnected from them because I knew that they had other medical professionals looking at them. I kind of felt that I had lost some control because they also were going out to specialists and other care providers.”



When Optum developed its care model, Chace said, “I thought, oh, this is wonderful because now these people have somebody who is following them, who actually can see them face to face in their facility and can report back to the physician.”

Eventually, she gave up her practice and joined Optum, where today she oversees about 100 advance practice clinicians in Wisconsin.

What she likes best about the Optum care model and how it continues to evolve and improve, is allowing clinicians to work closely with, advocate for and guide members through “this complicated medical system that we’re in. This is something that is so important in assisted living because they are still out there in the community and often just starting to really get involved in the world of procedures, testing, hospitalizations and surgeries.”

Optum APCs are there to “be that advocate that walks alongside them and be with them every step of the way.”

While those APCs have managers for the day-to-day, she provides education and support. “I am pretty involved with them. An APC who is with us 2 years becomes an expert in chronic illness.”

Now 71, she’s thinking about retirement. But she loves her job, and is not quite ready. And her interactions with the clinicians are especially important.

“I’m now in a position that most people my age get to be, where you look back and say, OK, well, I did all of this. Now, how can I give back? How can I help the new younger generation that’s coming up? How can I let them know about my mistakes, my wins, my successes so that they don’t have the same pitfalls. I want to make it easier for them.”

“

**Be that advocate that
walks alongside them
and be with them every
step of the way.”**

– Patricia Chace
Medical Director, Optum

Small things, big impact

Meet Emily Pitts

Nurse Practitioner
Colorado
Optum, since 2016

When Emily Pitts went to visit a 96-year-old member who needed to be moved temporarily from her assisted living apartment to the adjacent nursing community for diagnostics, treatment and monitoring, the woman was adamant that she didn't want to leave her apartment.

"She loved her apartment, and no one could tell her otherwise," Pitts said. "I think I must have spent at least 45 minutes with her trying to explain my concerns and promising that we would get her back to her apartment as soon as we could. She kept coming up with so many reasons why she couldn't leave. Finally, she said, 'I have dishes piled up in the sink. I can't leave.' And I said, 'OK, I'll do the dishes for you, and then we'll walk over.'"

"So I did. And then she just packed up her things and went with me."

It's those small victories with big impacts that Pitts said makes her work with residents of senior living communities so rewarding.

"It's not a heroics-focused sort of environment," she said. "I get to know my patients and their families. It's those things, the small details, that are so valuable to me. I love being able to have the time to hold meaningful conversations with people, not just about medical treatments, but what's important to them and what their goals are for their medical treatments. And then be creative and collaborative on how we're going to guide them or support them on their journey."



The daughter of 2 medical malpractice attorneys, Pitts grew up in California and originally was studying history at Occidental College in Los Angeles. But after taking a class in the history of medical ethics, she decided to pursue a career in health care. She has been working in the field more than 10 years, 6 as nurse practitioner.

Originally, she said, she wanted to go into pediatrics. But a rotation in palliative care led her to senior care and Optum.

She admits the work can be tough. “And “I’ve certainly had those moments where I’ve thought maybe I should go back to school and study art history or something,” Pitts said.

But then she remembers the advice a supervisor once shared: Never worry alone.

“It’s advice that I also share with my patients and their families,” Pitts said. “Because oftentimes there’s something on their mind and they don’t know whether it’s worth sharing or worth talking about. It almost always is.”

For instance, she had one patient who she’d been seeing for about 4 years when the woman began having panic attacks in the middle of the night. At first, they couldn’t figure out why. But after Pitts told her she should never worry alone, the patient opened up and told her she had lost a daughter to a heart attack at the age of 34. News of her death came with a call at 3 a.m.

“That’s when we realized the memories were probably triggering the panic attacks,” Pitts said. “We got her into counseling and on some medication to help. That’s what keeps me coming back, those personal interactions. The small things.”

“

**That’s what keeps me
coming back, those
personal interactions.
The small things.”**

– Emily Pitts
Nurse Practitioner, Optum

The Optum care model and UnitedHealthcare® Assisted Living Plan brings specialized health plan benefits, clinical support and expertise to residents in assisted living communities. The model is led by an advanced practice clinician who works one-on-one with residents to coordinate and support their physical and behavioral health care needs. Learn how this patient-centric model can benefit both you and your residents.

For more information:
optum.com/alc



optum.com

Optum is a registered trademark of Optum, Inc. in the U.S. and other jurisdictions. All other brand or product names are the property of their respective owners. Because we are continuously improving our products and services, Optum reserves the right to change specifications without prior notice. Optum is an equal opportunity employer. Stock photos used.

© 2023 Optum, Inc. All rights reserved. WF8861775 02/23