In medicine — as with much of life — listening matters.

Consider Teya Sepinuck. A few years ago, when checking in for a procedure, she was sat at a computer with her back turned when asking her two standard but personal questions (if she'd been the victim of abuse she'd felt depressed). Sepinuck replied "no" but told the nurse even if the answer had been yes, "I wouldn't tell you because I don't feel like you care'…. I left there thinking, is this really how we ask vulnerable people traumatic questions about their lives?"

Then, at another visit, a nurse asked her the same personal questions but gently. "It gave me a lot of hope about the possibility that even just giving feedback once, somebody may change."

Studies show that the simple act of listening seems to have taken a back seat in clinical care. An article in the Journal of General Internal Medicine showed that in almost 70 percent of studied encounters, the clinician interrupted the patient after a median of just 11 seconds. Another article, in Health Affairs, found a majority of the patients they studied reported having interactions with providers that lacked compassion. While advances in research and technology have benefited patients on many levels, these changes have also resulted in the loss of some of medicine’s “humanity.”

But the pendulum is slowly swinging back to an environment where listening and sharing experiences — and learning from them — are moving to the foreground. At Penn Medicine, the Listening Lab is proving to be an important part of that transition.

What is the Listening Lab? The Listening Lab is an online storytelling initiative that embraces the simple act of listening and sharing, and advocates for the power of listening as a form of care. The website (penlisteninglab.org) is home to a growing library of audio stories written and recorded by Penn Medicine staff, providers, patients, and caregivers that bring to life important experiences and reflections on aspects of healthcare that aren’t always discussed. Launched in 2019 under the sponsorship of the Patient Experience Leadership Team at Penn Medicine Academy (PMA), its goal is to gather and share stories about the importance of being present, nurturing compassionate relationships, and empowering communities. “It is grounded in the understanding that it can be empowering and therapeutic to hear and feel heard by another,” said Stephanie Kindt, senior consultant of Penn Medicine Experience.

Aaron Levy, PhD, of the University’s School of Arts and Sciences, and a special advisor for health and humanities initiatives in PMA, created the Listening Lab and collaborates with Kindt and Sepinuck — a member of HUP’s Patient and Family Advisory Council — as well as a planning committee comprising members from throughout Penn Medicine to continually expand its impact.

Levy and Sepinuck collaborate with story tellers to first record their stories and then edit down the narrative to a 3- to 5-minute segment. The final version is reviewed by a team of patients, caregivers, staff and providers from across Penn Medicine and receives full consent from the contributor before being uploaded to the site. The final story includes two versions: a version read aloud by the contributor and a transcript.

Although the initiative initially included a physical exhibit that traveled through the Health System, with COVID, its primary “home” is now online. So far more than 28,000 people from across Penn Medicine and throughout the country have listened to the nearly 50 stories on the site. “This is a moment in our lives when we all desperately seek opportunities to share what we are experiencing, to the privilege of our lives, with others,” Levy said. “This lab is a vehicle — a resource — for both self-reflection and connection with others.”

Continued on page 2
To ease discomfort after a surgical procedure, patients typically receive medication and instructions for recovery. During a recent study in Pennsylvania Hospital’s post-anesthesia care unit (PACU), however, patients also received another tool to reduce their pain: a pair of headphones. Funded by a research grant from the American Society of PeriAnesthesia Nurses (ASPN), the study suggests that when patients are experiencing persistent post-surgical pain, music may be one of the best medicines.

The collaborative study was spearheaded by Anna Lee Siguerza, MSN, assistant nurse manager of PeriAnesthesia, and PACU nurses Erin Kelly-Hellyer, MSN, and Mara Pestritto, BSN, BA, in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing. Though the study was delayed due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, by late spring 2020, the researchers were back on track and recruiting patients. They decided to specifically examine pain management among adult patients who were undergoing joint replacement surgery, using either general anesthesia or spinal anesthesia.

Prior to surgery, patients compiled a playlist with songs they enjoyed, and if randomly selected, would be provided an iPad and headphones to receive the music intervention in addition to the standard pharmacological therapy during their stay in the PACU. “It was interesting to see how eclectic the patients’ music choices were throughout the study,” Siguerza said. “One patient wanted to listen to a podcast, while other patients only wanted to listen to Bruce Springsteen or top hits.” The researchers found that patients who were in the music intervention group had a lower average pain score upon discharge from the PACU compared to the control group that only received the standard pharmacological therapy. In addition, patients provided feedback, sharing how the music positively impacted their overall experience. The team was able to share their findings with their periAnesthesia peers during last month’s virtual 2021 National ASPAN Conference.

“We understand that there’s going to be fresh surgical pain that needs to be addressed with medication,” said Siguerza. “But we hope that the study will provide alternative interventions for addressing pain management and lessen the use of opioid and narcotics post-surgery.”
Introducing the Wellfocused WORK LIFE PROGRAM

After a year of prolonged stress connected to the COVID-19 pandemic, work-life balance is more important than ever. Whether they are working from home or navigating long clinical hours, many employees have struggled to maintain work-life balance while also juggling shifts within their work environment. In response, the Wellfocused team is rolling out a robust Work-Life program that will help employees identify realistic ways to prioritize and manage the responsibilities of their day-to-day lives.

“We recognize how difficult the past year has been, and we understand that the idea of work-life balance seems like an unrealistic concept in today’s society,” said Emily McPeak, UPHS employee well-being coordinator. “Despite the challenges of the past year, we all have the ability to take control and refocus our priorities.”

The Wellfocused Work-Life Program will kick-off this month with a live financial wellness workshop series, a spotlight on tuition assistance and academic advising offerings, and live summer camp safety sessions for Penn families, presented by the YMCA. Future programming will be categorized by different life stages, with new resources highlighted each month, from “Beginning Your Career” to “Preparing for Retirement.”

“The best care for our patients starts with the best care for our employees,” McPeak said. “Our goal is to help employees navigate each stage — or change — in their life by providing webinars, work-life balances sessions, and by-appointment life coaching sessions. There is something for everyone!”

To get started, employees can visit the HR & You Work Life section at www.upshrandyou.com/public/welcome.

CARE Program: PRINCETON HEALTH NURSES ADVANCE THEIR CAREERS

Congratulations to 18 registered nurses who were the first from Princeton Health to be elevated to the highest tiers of Penn Medicine’s Clinical Advancement and Recognition of Excellence (CARE) program, which recognizes clinical care nurses who advance their education and expertise while remaining involved in direct patient care.

The nurses represent Princeton Medical Center (PMC), Princeton House Behavioral Health, and Princeton Medicine Physicians. Princeton Health recently adopted the CARE program, which features four tiers: CN1, for newly licensed nurses; CN2, recognizing nurses with at least 15 months’ experience in clinical care; and CN3 and CN4, which nurses achieve through professional development activities, such as peer education; continuous quality improvement; evidence-based practice initiatives; or other special activities that contribute to clinical practices in areas or departments beyond their home units.

“Nursing excellence is a priority at Princeton Health, and the CARE program is an important recognition,” said Sheila G. Kempf, RN, PhD, vice president of Patient Care Services and chief Nursing officer. “Our nurses enjoy professional development opportunities, and it directly benefits our patients because the nurses’ experience and expertise remain at the bedside.”

A Serendipitous Meeting AFTER A LIFE-SAVING EXPERIENCE

Fate, destiny, luck — there are many words for something that happens at just the right time, with just the right people. For Melissa Spahr’s, RN, CCH Stroke Program Coordinator, serendipity struck while presenting a case study about a stroke patient whose life was saved by her team of physicians — only to find out the patient’s wife was in the audience.

On November 19, 2020, Spahr virtually logged into what she thought would be a typical quarterly EMS forum. She expected to engage with CCH employees and EMS providers about stroke awareness, prevention, and treatment. “This patient was chosen out of a handful of patients who came in and had a quick response time,” Spahr explained. One purpose of the EMS forums is to inform future success, and John Whiteman’s case highlighted what the American Heart Association emphasizes as critical to stroke treatment — decreasing arrival time to treatment time.

“John had a great response time. And he’s had a wonderful recovery. It was kind of the perfect package,” she said. Meanwhile, Tammy Whiteman, EMS provider, logged into the same forum from home. While she has attended many of these forums over the years, this one was destined to be a little more personal.

“I was sitting and listening to the case study, and John was working on a speech at the end of the table. The slide popped up — 66-year-old man, difficulty saying my god, that’s John!” she recalled. “At the very end, they said, ‘Does anybody have anything they’d like to add?’ I popped John on the screen, and said, ‘This is your patient.’ And he said thank you to everyone,’ she said. ‘It was amazing. It was very emotional.”

As for Spahr, she was similarly moved. “I was completely blown away,” she said. “I thought that someone had set me up in a way, but then it was revealed that everyone else was caught off guard, as well. We all had chills.”

Whiteman said she and her husband were grateful for this unplanned but special surprise. “It was a really touching moment where it sort of all pulled together. We were able to say thank you to those people who do this every day, and let them know that what they do means so much to not only every provider they work with, but the families that they touch.”
DIFFERENCE MAKERS:

RISING ABOVE POVERTY AND RACISM TO CARE FOR AND INSPIRE OTHERS

Rachel Farmer, a unit clerk in Penn Medicine Lancaster General Hospital’s Trauma Neurosurgical Unit, has fought many battles in her life. Now, she fights for others on the front lines of COVID-19. Often called “Reverend Rachel” by her colleagues, Farmer aims to bring comfort and levity to an incredibly stressful time for patients, their families and her colleagues.

After attaining her Master’s in Divinity from Lancaster Theological Seminary, Farmer joined LGH in May 2020. She uses her spirituality to help others process their trauma.

The pandemic hit close to home when Farmer lost her mother to COVID-19 earlier this year. Farmer credits her mother, who is the daughter of sharecroppers from Alabama, as her role model. “My mother came up north from rural Alabama, looking for a better life,” Farmer said.

“She came to New York City, got a job as a factory worker and bought a house. For someone who was born in a system determined to hold Black people down, she accomplished so much,” Farmer herself broke racial barriers in 1988 when she became the first African-American Miss Lancaster County. “The weekend after I won, the Ki Klaa Klub held a rally in Lancaster, and pageant organizers sent me back to Temple University, where I was in school.”

Recently, Farmer made a surprise connection with the spouse of a very ill patient. As the two got to know each other, they discovered they had both attended seminary and their interactions quickly elevated from unit clerk and spouse-visitor to one of friendship and gratitude. Farmer said, “The comfort demonstrated by the spouse in the days leading up to the patient’s passing was invaluable. I was able to be there and empathize with their grief, even though we had no previous relationship.”

Farmer, who has a large, multiracial family, decided she wanted to be “part of the solution” to the impacts of racism that she and her mother had experienced. As a result of her work on the trauma floor, she now hopes to attend nursing school.

With three children and a full-time job, Farmer still makes time for her passion in life: singing. She has performed at Lancaster’s Prima Theater and used her voice to support the Crispus Attucks Community Center. In January she was honored by the center with the Essence of Humanity Award, an honor intended to recognize individuals that go above and beyond to demonstrate persistence when dealing with adversity, and to recognize those who demonstrate the spirit of caring to individuals on a daily basis.

Farmer accepted the award in memory of her mother.

At Penn Medicine, we all aspire to be Difference Makers who represent the Penn Medicine Experience (PMX) in action. PMX sets a consistent standard across all of our entities and work locations to make every touchpoint an opportunity to build enduring connections with patients, families, visitors and colleagues, which is a foundational part of the UPenn Success Three Program.

DO YOU HAVE A DIFFERENCE MAKER ON YOUR TEAM?
If so, let us know! Email sally.sapega@pennmedicine.upenn.edu.

The Language of Compassion

Between worries about their loved one’s health and anxieties over COVID-19 restrictions, it’s no surprise that hospitalizations can be just as stressful for family members as they are for patients. Add a language barrier to the equation and the experience can feel overwhelming. But, as one recent visitor discovered, the Penn Presbyterian Medical Center team is committed to ensuring all patients and families feel seen, heard, and supported.

Luis Gonzalez has worked in the health system for 21 years and has served as the manager of Patient Access (Admissions and Central Registration) for a decade. He is driven by a “simple philosophy — treat everyone the way you’d want your mother to be treated.”

When Director of Patient Experience Suzanne Smith, MEd, CHES, asked Gonzalez for his help after a Pennsylvania woman who spoke limited English came in to visit a patient, he stepped up without hesitation. “She was concerned about her husband’s condition and wanted to see him, but there was a language barrier complicating communication,” he said. “I intervened [in Spanish] to provide all the information I could and to make her aware that we were there for her and her husband.”

Gonzalez offered support to the woman for two days — first comforting her after her husband’s surgery was rescheduled for the next day, then gently explaining why the patient needed to go to the heart and vascular intensive care unit rather than the PACU. As Smith worked to get the woman the visit she was promised, Gonzalez focused on putting her at ease.

“We must intentionally invest in Black people and Black neighborhoods.”

“Caring for people deeply is just in my DNA,” he said. “You never know what a person’s going through, and what motivates me every day is knowing I can touch someone’s life just by being compassionate.”

GUIDING EMERGENCY MEDICINE TOWARD A NORTH STAR OF RACIAL JUSTICE

CHANGES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE
South credits a biblical quote as helping to guide her career: “You shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.” But it was the death of George Floyd and the resulting protests that helped clarify a crucial throughline across each of her work locations to make every touchpoint an opportunity to build enduring connections with patients, families, visitors and colleagues, which is a foundational part of the UPenn Success Three Program.

She has also overseen and helped develop strategies to increase resident diversity in the department, such as increasing the number of underrepresented minority (URM) students who interview with them and creating an interview guide for faculty in which “more emphasis was put on their background and leadership potential while traditionally the emphasis is on grades and scores in medical school.” In addition, a “diversity day” effort for URM students who interview with them was promised, Gonzalez focused on getting the woman the visit she was promised, Gonzalez offered support to put her at ease. She had been concerned about her husband’s condition and wanted to see him, but there was a language barrier complicating communication, he said. “I intervened [in Spanish] to provide all the information I could and to make her aware that we were there for her and her husband.”

For someone who was born in a system looking for a better life,” Farmer said. “You never know what a person’s going through, and what motivates me every day is knowing I can touch someone’s life just by being compassionate.”