Thursday Memo – March 9, 2017

We take care of patients that no one else can – by Anita Kostecki

As many of you know, I have worked here at the health center for just over 20 years. A number of you also know that I am in the process of transitioning from my full time job here and at UMass Memorial to a new position at Boston Medical Center, which I will be starting after the 1st of the year. For that reason, I asked the organizers of this morning's program if I could have a few minutes to speak to you all, and I appreciate them allowing me this time.

The focus of my work here at EMK (previously GBV when I started in 1996) has been on pregnancy and a range of other women's health care issues. You might imagine, then, that I would spend my time sharing with you what a privilege it has been to care for women who come to us from all over the world, entrusting themselves and their babies to us during a vulnerable and special time in their lives. Or how amazing it has been to be part of a committed team of nurses, MAs, social workers, therapists, and medical providers who all work tirelessly together to offer kind and loving care to these women and their families. Or maybe I should tell you how our OB nurse, Clara Pastor, is more like my mother or my sister or an extra body part, rather than my closest coworker. And how she drove a laboring woman and her kids to the hospital from the health center once (or maybe twice) who had no ride and no childcare. Or what it feels like to run into families in Price Rite here in Worcester who point to their children and teenagers and remind me and them that I was the first person in the world to see them. Or to express how much it meant to me when one of our social workers came to the hospital early one morning, after I had been up all night sitting with a father whose wife was critically ill in the ICU while he tried to care for their 2 week old baby alone. And how proud and relieved I was when a car seat, a crib, blankets and baby clothes magically appeared within 24 hours of me putting out a request to coworkers --all to help a family with a new baby at the hospital who had nothing ready at home, and for whom the hospital SW threatened to call DCF if they could find no supplies.

But instead of those things which are somewhat specific to my line of work and make up some of my most precious memories, I want to tell you a story of a patient that had nothing to do with me, but who I think exemplifies the incredible work that this HC and all of you do every day that you come to EMK.

I walked into our hallway on Side C a couple months ago and there was an older non English speaking man crumbled on the floor in front of the secretary's desk, wailing loudly and crying
uncontrollably, clearly confused and very frightened. Staff who were standing by him, trying to help calm him down, told me that someone from Behavioral Health, as well as an interpreter were on the way. For his privacy and to clear the hallway for other patients, we convinced him to allow us to move him into an exam room. There I likewise tried to help the man gather himself, but he remained fearful and when the interpreter came, we were able to hear from him that he thought someone was trying to hurt or kill him. I was convinced that we would need an ambulance right away to safely bring him to the psych ER at UMass, but then our director of Behavioral Health, Mary Fiero, arrived to take over (thanks Mary) and was able to get him more settled, located his wife through one the staff members of his refugee assistance agency, and then did eventually get him to the hospital. It turned out that the patient had already been to EMH at UMass the day before, and in his hand as he came thru our doors was a crumbled piece of paper that said his diagnosis from them was "emotional distress" and his discharge instructions were to come to EMK the next day and see our Urgent Care physician, Dr Dobles. Thus he was there for his follow up.

The reason I am so struck by this story is that it shows what I have always believed about this health center and the people who work here. We take care patients that no one else can. We take of patients that no one else wants to or who others may even be afraid of or look down upon. We do so with a level of gentleness and patience and competence that I seldom see in any other health care setting. We don't judge patients who struggle to communicate due to language barriers, limited literacy, mental illness or psychological pain and trauma. We look beyond the crisis to the person inside it and help people out of their hard places with compassion and support. We often have to do this work over and over again with the same patients, as well as with the endless stream of new patients who come seeking our help to relieve their suffering. We try to make all comers feel that they may have better days ahead, and we have to believe in that hope ourselves in order to keep moving forward.

From the bottom of my heart I want to thank all the people with whom I have worked, both those who have left the HC before me and especially all of you who are here outlasting me. You are brave and inspiring. Please keep up your hard and important work.

This job and this place has meant the world to me, and because I can't completely "cut the cord," I will still be doing a few hours a week of gynecology clinics here at EMK and supporting the cause in a small way. I look forward to staying in touch.

Thank you again.