Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioners Serve Vital Role in Opioid Intervention
Mental health and substance use-related concerns are prevalent across the nation, are pandemic across all ages, and are devastating South Florida communities, families, and individuals. A growing number of children suffer from mental illness and substance use. It is estimated that nearly one in five adults is affected by a mental health and/or substance use problem. As the population ages, these health issues are expected to rise significantly among the elderly.

The costs related to the care of these individuals is high; however, the costs of untreated mental health problems are even higher. Recent health care legislation that aimed to increase care for these individuals allowed for greater mental health coverage. However, even in the face of overwhelming need, there is a severe shortage of mental health resources and providers—and the infrastructure of mental health facilities lags.

Nursing has historically filled a role in mental health care. In the 1950s, nursing schools began to offer mental health nursing education and care as an important part of nursing practice. This specialty grew and graduate programs developed.

In 1965, states began to regulate advanced practice nursing, and the need for clinical nurse specialists and psychiatric mental health nurse practitioners (PMHNPs) expanded. Certification by examination was offered for PMHNPs in the late 1990s. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and other third-party payers recognized this provider role.

Today, the Nova Southeastern University Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing (ACON) recognizes the need for advanced practice nursing mental health providers. In 2018, the ACON opened a PMHNP training program on the Miramar Campus. In 2020, this A.P.R.N. specialty opened on the Tampa Bay Regional Campus.

The goal is to prepare expert nurse practitioners to provide psychiatric care, which includes prescribing psychotherapy and psychotropic medications, and care for behavioral health issues for individuals across the lifespan. Expanding a workforce of advanced practice nurses, who are prepared to work independently within the team of other mental health and substance use providers, will fill a gap in services.

Nurses who apply to the PMHNP program must have at least two years of nursing experience prior to entering the clinical courses. The educational program builds on the foundational skills of therapeutic communication, medication administration, and clinical nursing diagnostic skills. PMHNPs are educated with the specialized knowledge that integrates care with the understanding of psychiatric and pharmacology principles essential in the treatment of these patients.

Students acquire skills in diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up care of an individual with a mental health and substance use problem. Faculty members are experienced in psychiatric mental health and substance use, and students learn through precepted clinical experiences in hospital, community, residential, and outpatient behavioral health units.

In 2003, the ACON began its history by offering the B.S.N. degree to men and women, filling a significant nursing need in South Florida. It seems fitting that the ACON continues its legacy today by meeting the need for mental health and substance use care in the community—preparing R.N.s to become PMHNPs.
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The Opioid Epidemic

and THE ROLE OF THE PSYCHIATRIC MENTAL HEALTH NURSE PRACTITIONER
BREAKING NEWS
Opioid overdose deaths remain a U.S. national epidemic.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2019, more than 130 deaths resulting from opioid overdose occurred daily in the United States alone.1

Opioids are abused for numerous reasons, particularly for the minimization of pain, to aid relaxation and relief, to reduce the effort of breathing, and to reduce depression. The National Institute on Drug Abuse defines the misuse of prescription drugs as the use in any manner that has not been directed by a health care provider.2

Misuse may include taking a medication without a prescription, borrowing a family member’s medications, or using larger amounts of a medication for longer periods than prescribed. When the body’s response to opioids weakens with repeated use, the need to use more opioids to achieve the same response encourages excessive usage and dependence. This brings us to the question of why individuals abuse drugs like opioids and how this practice has become widespread.

The rise in U.S. opioid use is believed to have started in the 1990s. During this time, the World Health Organization advocated for and recommended using opioids for cancer pain management. Pharmaceutical companies reassured the public and health care providers that opioids would not instigate addiction.

In addition, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved OxyContin, Percocet, and Vicodin. IMS Health reported that the number of U.S. painkiller prescriptions has almost quadrupled from 1991 to 2018, from 76 million per year to 219 million per year.3 Opioid manufacturers and prescribers play a key role in curtailing the opioid crisis.

Nurses are in a unique position to contribute significantly to the opioid epidemic war effort. To combat the number of deaths by opioid overdose, the American Nurses Association outlined a National Pain Strategy that includes ways nurses can significantly help patients and families manage chronic pain.4

Three specific areas that can influence opioid dependence, overdose, and death include addressing all aspects of chronic pain management in the primary care settings; participating in an interdisciplinary approach to pain management; and supporting chronic pain self-management strategies.5

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

By LINDA MAYS, D.N.P., PMHNP-BC
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Moreover, advanced practice nurses can apply to prescribe buprenorphine—a medication used to treat opioid addiction—after completing a 24-hour course. Increasing the pool of buprenorphine-prescribing nurse practitioners is crucial to addressing the opioid epidemic.

The Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing prepares advanced practice nurses to safely prescribe controlled substances, effectively treat opioid dependence, and support opioid use recovery. Students enrolled in the ACON’s Master of Science in Nursing Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (PMHNP) program receive comprehensive classroom training on the use of buprenorphine and other medications to treat opioid dependence.

Additionally, these students are mentored by experts and obtain hands-on experience in drug detox and recovery settings. NSU psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner students are being prepared to safely prescribe controlled substances to children and adults when they graduate, which can ultimately save lives.

“Nurses are in a unique position to contribute significantly to the opioid epidemic war effort.”


Linda Mays is the PMHNP program director.
In January 2020, the Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing added a new concentration to its Master of Science in Nursing program at the Tampa Bay Regional Campus with the establishment of the Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (PMHNP) track.

The PMHNP program concentration was created to meet the need for more advanced practice registered nurses (A.P.R.N.s) in this critical field, which is seeing an increase in mental health-related illnesses. A psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner is an advanced practice registered nurse trained to provide a range of mental health services to patients and families in a variety of settings.

According to Linda Mays, D.N.P., PMHNP-BC, program director, “America needs to increase the availability of qualified, compassionate mental health providers to address the opioid crisis and chronic, persistent mental illness.”

The new program concentration, which currently has 147 students, provides comprehensive training that helps the degree seekers learn how to diagnose symptoms, develop a treatment plan, and prescribe medication. It encompasses an eight-semester curriculum that includes classes such as Neurobiology Psychopharmacology and Psychiatric Management.

**PHOTOS TO THE RIGHT**

**TOP:** M.S.N./A.P.R.N. students assess heart and lung sounds on each other.

**CENTER:** A Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing (ACON) student practices the ophthalmoscope technique on a simulator.

**BOTTOM:** ACON students learn how to master the ophthalmoscope technique by examining each other.

*Scott Colton is the director of medical communications and public relations for the NSU Health Professions Division.*
Angella John, M.S.N., FNP-BC, and Tiffiny Wilson, M.S.N., FNP-BC, are more than just mother and daughter. This is evidenced by the fact that both studied in and graduated together from the Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing’s Master of Science in Nursing Family Nurse Practitioner program.

The similarities do not stop there. In a unique professional achievement, John and Wilson decided to open a shared nurse practitioner practice near their home community of Lauderhill called Mother Daughter Primary Care LLC, located in Plantation, Florida. Wilson gives credit to her parents for the joint practice idea. Their community was a natural fit for a shared practice.

Wilson’s degree and background in communications management helped “get the word out.” The team also sought advice from marketer Andora Anderson. “We worked together using social media, and Anderson reached out to news stations, which reported our joint graduations,” Wilson explained.

The mother-daughter duo has a simple and healthy attitude toward practice operation: “We share leadership. We run every idea by each other before making any decisions.”

The physical opening of a health profession practice is a daunting task. John and Wilson relate “great challenge in raising capital, in restructuring and building out our space, and budgeting for all of our expenses,” they said. “We also had to get insurance credentials and set up billing and electronic medical records systems, while continuing to market. Once the practice opened, of course, we had to manage day-to-day operations.”
Both practitioners are women of faith. “There are so many moving pieces to a medical practice, but once we took one step, God sent everyone to help and offer expertise in their fields,” they said. “We also have a mentor, Dale Gibson, who gives advice in this process.”

Family imprint is also evident in practice receptionist and administrator Sonia Nelson, who is Wilson’s aunt. John and Wilson selected a practice location close to John’s church—Lauderhill Seventh Day Adventist. “Many church members would ask us, ‘When will you two open your own practice so we can come to you?’ It also helps that we are very close to Plantation General Hospital,” they explained.

“We see ourselves primarily as blessed by God to enable us to open a medical practice,” they added. “We also know of other successful nurse practitioner-owned practices, which inspire us. We hope to be examples to other nurse practitioners who wish to do the same thing.”

John and Wilson highly valued their time at the Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing. “NSU is a great university, located right in our backyard. It was a win-win for us to attend and graduate together,” they said. “We learned a great deal from our professors, including Stefanie LaManna, Ph.D., M.P.H., A.P.R.N., FNP-C, AGACNP-BC, on transitioning from nursing to nurse practitioner-provider. Our experience at NSU was wonderful.”

Richard Masella is the former associate dean of NSU’s College of Dental Medicine.

John and Wilson at their Nova Southeastern University graduation.
Becoming a travel nurse wasn’t a career choice Mariam I. Besharat, B.S.N., a 2014 NSU Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing (ACON) alumna, was even aware of when she decided to become a nurse. Once she learned about the option while in nursing school, however, Besharat immediately added it to her vocational bucket list.

Besharat, who was born and raised in Miami, Florida, always enjoyed her science classes when she was a child. What really triggered her interest in nursing, however, was an incident that occurred when she was in elementary school.

“When a family member got sick, all I wanted to do was help him get better and assist in any way I could,” said Besharat, who is currently pursuing her Master of Science in Nursing degree from the ACON. “I had a play nurse kit I brought to his bedside, and I watched in admiration as the nurses worked with diligence and compassion.”

Her steadfast commitment to becoming a nurse continued in high school, where she spent three summers volunteering at Baptist Hospital of Miami shadowing nurses and assisting patients recovering from surgery.

“It was rewarding, so I knew from those experiences that I wanted to continue to learn how to help people in need,” she said.

**NSU OFFERS ATTRACTIVE OPTIONS**

After earning her Associate of Arts degree with a psychology minor from Florida State University in Tallahassee in 2012, Besharat began investigating the next step in her educational quest. “I attended a large public university for my nursing prerequisites and was searching for a smaller, more personal nursing program to apply to for my bachelor’s degree,” she explained.
Several factors catapulted NSU’s Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing to the top of Besharat’s list, including enthusiastic endorsements from her mother and brother, who are both NSU alumni. “After researching the college, I was very interested in what it had to offer,” she said. “I learned that NSU’s clinical sites were in many local hospitals, and that I would have an opportunity to gain insight into various hospitals where I would potentially like to work.”

Besharat was also drawn to other ACON aspects, such as small classes and clinical size. “I felt I was seen as a student, and the professors knew me by name,” she added. “The most valuable lesson I learned as an NSU student was a strong foundation of the integrity and privilege of becoming a registered nurse.”

**EDUCATIONAL ENHANCEMENT**

After graduating from the ACON in December 2014, Besharat was accepted into the Versant RN Residency program at Baptist Hospital of Miami. “I had an amazing opportunity to ease the challenging transition from nursing student to novice registered nurse and work alongside a preceptor in the pediatric intermediate care unit (IMCU),” she said.

During the next year, Besharat worked independently as a registered nurse (RN) in the hospital’s pediatric IMCU unit. Although the work was fulfilling, she decided she wanted to be more actively involved in the pediatric realm. “I desired to work in a large children’s hospital that was solely focused on pediatrics and recalled my pediatric clinical site at NSU,” she explained.

In May 2016, Besharat left Baptist to accept a position at Joe DiMaggio Children’s Hospital in Hollywood, Florida, in the medical-surgical unit. “I enjoyed the ‘It’s all about the kids’ atmosphere and the vast opportunities available to the pediatric patients. I love the pediatric population, and I strive to be the best nurse advocate I can be for them,” she said.

“Working with children has taught me to live more in the moment and appreciate the small things in life,” she added. “My patients are so resilient and share so much warmth, smiles, and laughter even through their illnesses, which makes it so rewarding.”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11
PERIPATETIC PEDIATRIC NURSING

From the day she was born, Besharat only resided in Florida, even as she progressed through her various educational and vocational adventures. That changed in late 2018, however, when she accepted her inaugural travel nurse assignment at a children’s hospital in Los Angeles, California.

“I first learned about travel nursing at NSU when a professor in the B.S.N. program shared her previous travel nurse journeys with the class,” she explained. “I found travel nursing to be extremely intriguing, so after gaining a foundation of work experience, I took a leap of faith and signed my first travel contract.”

A mix of excitement and trepidation flooded through Besharat as she boarded a one-way flight to California to begin a new chapter in her nursing career. “I decided to become a travel nurse for the adventure and the travel, but also for the opportunity to learn additional clinical skills and work in different hospital systems,” she said.

“I enjoy travel nursing because I get the opportunity to experience living in a new city with a short-term commitment,” she added. “The majority of assignments are a duration of 13 weeks, and sometimes there is an opportunity to extend the assignment further if the hospital has a need.”

The flexibility that comes with being a travel nurse makes it an attractive career option for many professionals. “When an assignment is complete, a nurse can start the next assignment as soon as possible or take a break for a few weeks or months, because there are no time limits,” she explained.

Since becoming a travel nurse, Besharat has worked in several locales, including Los Angeles, California, New York City, New York, and St. Petersburg, Florida. Next up is a nursing stint in Atlanta, Georgia. “I have enjoyed living in various places across the country and experiencing different climates and demographics,” she said.

Because she has a desire to gain further knowledge about the nursing field and pursue future career advancement opportunities, Besharat is in the midst of earning her Master of Science in Nursing from NSU’s Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing. “My goal is to increase my skill set so I can one day work as a nurse leader in health care administration or in a university setting,” she said.

“I am very interested in health policy, nurse advocacy, and public health,” she added. “I really enjoy that NSU’s M.S.N. program is online, so I am able to continue travel nursing and can work at my own pace toward achieving my dreams.”
In addition to clinical hours, nursing students rely on simulation training to perfect their skills, deal with unpredictable challenges, and practice empathy. A grant from the Hugoton Foundation recently allowed the Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing to grow the population of simulators at the Miami Campus with seven new Juno model simulators.

The Juno 300, which is relatively lightweight and wire-less, allows students to run simulations that include checking blood pressure, circulation, airway, heart and bowel sounds, vascular access, urinary, cardiac, and medication administration. These educational tools are incredibly important for NSU nursing students.

As the need for qualified nurses increases—especially in Florida—training on such devices becomes crucial to the curriculum. While nothing can replace the real thing, utilizing simulators helps students perfect their skills on routine procedures. Additionally, the flexibility of the Juno model helps students react to various situations.

The Hugoton Foundation has been a generous supporter of the Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing in the past in regard to helping the college purchase a pediatric simulator at the Miami Campus. The foundation is keen to support the students at NSU for generations to come, and one way to do that is with educational teaching materials that can be used by all students repeatedly.

The college is incredibly pleased to have received this support, because the impact felt by students goes beyond their time on campus and continues throughout their nursing careers.

Catie Dargue is the director of corporate and foundation relations for NSU’s Division of Advancement and Community Relations.

Practice Makes Perfect

Michelle Julian, Ph.D., M.S.N., R.N., department chair, demonstrates how to listen to breath sounds (left) and how to take a pulse (right) on a Juno simulator.
TAMPA BAY REGIONAL CAMPUS IN CLEARWATER, FLORIDA

TAMPA BAY RIBBON CUTTING
Marks Milestone Achievement
On September 14, 2019, Nova Southeastern University (NSU) and Drs. Kiran C. and Pallavi Patel, M.D.s, proudly unveiled the new, 311,000-square-foot Tampa Bay Regional Campus in Clearwater, Florida, at a festive ribbon-cutting ceremony that attracted more than 500 attendees. The new campus was made possible through a $230-million donation from the Patels to NSU—$80 million in gifts and a $150-million investment in real estate and facilities.

“We are immensely proud of this beautiful and state-of-the-art campus—a true Herculean effort by Moss, Baker Barrios, ACAI, all of our contractors, and of course, our dedicated NSU team,” said George L. Hanbury II, Ph.D., NSU president and CEO.

NSU has been providing a wide range of educational programs in the Tampa Bay area since 1991. The Tampa Bay Regional Campus offers a broader curriculum and will house approximately 2,000 students and 125 faculty and staff members when it is fully occupied. The Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing joined the Tampa Bay area in 2016 with the Family Nurse Practitioner program.

“The NSU Tampa Bay Regional Campus brings to the region opportunities for autonomy and professional connectedness to RN applicants to build on their professional edge and expand their care delivery knowledge to benefit patients. This new campus will expand the number of nurses educated to fulfill the role of practitioner, which is so needed today during a time of unprecedented health crisis,” said Marcella Rutherford, Ph.D., M.B.A., M.S.N., R.N., the college’s dean.

“The programs offered at the Tampa Bay Regional Campus by the Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing (ACON) will benefit the nurse, the profession, the patients, and the community for years to come,” she added. “Nurse practitioners are needed now. The ACON’s programs will infuse nursing’s unique holistic approach to patient care—honed in their years as an R.N.—into the students’ learning, expanding their knowledge, skills, and abilities to offer a health value for all.”

FROM LEFT
R.N. to B.S.N. program begins.

Entry B.S. in Nursing program begins at Fort Lauderdale/Davie Campus.

Successful CCNE accreditation occurs.

Traditional M.S.N. program launches.

Ph.D. in Nursing program with a Focus on Nursing Education begins.

Successful CCNE reaccreditation occurs.

Entry B.S. in Nursing program opens at the Palm Beach Campus.

Department of Nursing becomes the College of Nursing.

Doctor of Nursing Practice program commences.

Doctor of Nursing Practice program CCNE accreditation occurs.

R.N. to M.S.N. program begins.
CELEBRATING
Almost Two Decades of Growth

2015
Adult-Gerontology Acute Care Nurse Practitioner program launches at the Palm Beach Campus.

Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner program begins at Miramar Campus.
College of Nursing is renamed the Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing.
Family Nurse Practitioner Postgraduate Certificate program opens at the Palm Beach Campus.

2016
Family Nurse Practitioner program begins at the Tampa Campus.
Successful CCNE 10-year reaccreditation occurs.
Adult-Gerontology Acute Care Nurse Practitioner Postgraduate Certificate program launched at the Palm Beach Campus.
Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner Postgraduate Certificate program established at the Miramar Campus.

2018
Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner program begins at the Tampa Bay Regional Campus.
D.N.P. to Ph.D. program begins.
Accelerated B.S.N. program is launched at the Fort Myers Campus.
B.S.N. to D.N.P. program begins.

2019

2020
#1 of 17
BEST NURSING SCHOOLS IN FLORIDA
—Collegefactual.com

#21
Top 25 Hispanic-Serving Nursing Schools
NursingSchoolHub.com

#10
10 Best Accredited Nursing Schools in Florida
NursingProcess.com

#104
Best Online Program
—Online Graduate Nursing
U.S. News & World Report

#23 of 519
Best Nursing Colleges in the United States
Collegefactual.com
- 6 campus locations
- 1,375+ students’ average number of clinical hours before graduating from the Entry Bachelor of Science in Nursing
- 540+ students’ average number of clinical hours before graduating from the Master of Science in Nursing Advanced Practice Registered Nurse program
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- 98% A.P.R.N. state licensure exam pass rates
- 5,200+ nursing graduates since 2003
- 100% achievement scores on Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education site-visit standards
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