Taking it from excellence and making it exceptional

By Natalie Dragon

Keeping a nurse and midwife with you at all times is the advice Chief Executive Officer of The Royal Women’s Hospital in Melbourne and Women’s Health Nurse Sue Matthews recommends for people entering into some form of leadership, whether it be education, research or management. “Those who take the nurse and midwife with them, always make the best decisions.”

Dr Sue Matthews, from Ontario, Canada, took the role of CEO at The Women’s Hospital in February 2014. She came from Interim President and CEO of the Niagara Health System in Canada and has held numerous leadership positions, including Provincial Chief Nursing Officer of Ontario in 2003. “Nursing is who I am, not what I do. In everything I do, there’s a nurse somewhere in the decision making process, thinking about patients and staff is automatic.”

Sue says it’s very empowering as a leader to work in an environment like The Women’s, which she says is doing great work. “My goal is to take it from excellent and make it exceptional, especially in the patient experience. People go into healthcare to make a difference, patient experience. People go into healthcare to make a difference, so sometimes the system prevents it. It is my job to support staff to provide the best care they can.”

Sue and her mother both survived breast cancer; Sue two and a half years now.

The ground-breaking research the Women’s Hospital is involved in, not only in cancer but also in midwifery and neonatal is special to her. “It has a very warm place in my heart. Being a part of that is important to me - someone in this organisation may be involved in curing cancer. Every day I come to work thankful for what we do.”

Starting out on a general ward, Sue found herself drawn to the ‘gyna’ patients, where she first thought she might be drawn to women’s health. It was experience doing extra casual work in a new sexual assault crisis centre that was the biggest turning point for her, Sue says. She cared for a young woman who came in at 3am, having been sexually assaulted. “I was always the nurse that looked at the newest greatest piece of equipment and how it worked, it was exciting. I could IV resite and was called on often because I was proficient at it. But with this woman, I didn’t do anything technical other than gather the forensic evidence kit. This is where I really understood what nursing is. Nursing is not about being technically proficient - it’s great when you are - but it’s only a piece of it.”

Sue gravitated more and more towards women’s health. A passion for delivering patient centred care propelled her after another ‘turning point’. Looking after a woman who had a dilatation and curettage, visiting hours had ended and Sue asked a woman’s partner to leave. “This man turned to me and said: ‘We have waited seven years and spent $35,000 on this dream that has gone. You are telling me to go; I want to stay and grieve with my wife.’

“This was when I realised that there were rules in place in a system that did not provide for patients. I thought ‘I HAVE TO CHANGE THIS’.”

Soon after, Sue transitioned into an educator role between hospital and university which started the ball rolling into leadership. “I never ever had a vision to become a CEO. My goal has always been to gain experience, expand my learning and provide that patient centred-ness of care.”

Education equals opportunity, is her message to nurses and midwives starting out. “The further you go and broaden your education, the more opportunities are in front of you.” Her own career has been serendipitous, she says. “I’ve been in the right place and at the right time.” She has taken positions that have been out of her ‘comfort zone’, including her move to Australia to take on the CEO role at The Women’s. “If you are considering another role, do not be afraid to go from being an expert to novice again.”

The “stars were aligned” Sue says of her move to Australia. “We have been so warmly welcomed. In Canada we lived about 25 minutes from the US border – it was a completely different place. Yet we could fly 25 hours and feel right at home.”

Husband Rick transferred to a similar position in the Asia-Pacific region and 23 year old daughter Kirsten is studying law at Monash University. Their other daughter Hayley is in Canada studying Media and Communications.

Another piece of advice Sue says is not to turn down a position without knowing enough about it. “People talk themselves out of applying for a position. If it’s not too much of a stretch, and even if it’s not necessarily the direction you think you want to move in, do not let it prevent you from applying. If you look at a sailboat, it does not always go straight to its destination – it’s about trusting yourself.”