

## Chantale LeClerc, RN, MSc, GNC(C)

Chief Nursing Officer, SCO Health Service  
Winner, 2007 OHA Nursing Leadership Award

Chantale LeClerc has been the chief nursing officer at SCO Health Service in Ottawa since May 2004. LeClerc holds a Bachelor of Science (Nursing) from McGill University and a Master of Science (Nursing) from the University of Toronto. She is also a graduate of the Johnson & Johnson Wharton Fellows Program in Management for Nurse Executives. Her clinical and research expertise are in the field of gerontological nursing.

LeClerc has held a number of nursing leadership and administrative positions in various sectors including community, acute and continuing care. She is a member of several provincial and national groups, including the Academy of Canadian Executive Nurses, the Council of Academic Hospitals of Ontario and the Canadian Association



Recent winners of the OHA Nursing Leadership Award (from left to right), Esther Green (2005), Chantale LeClerc (2007), Ginette Rodger (2006) and Mary Ferguson-Paré (2004).

on Gerontology. She holds a joint appointment with the School of Nursing at the University of Ottawa and the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Toronto. LeClerc also volunteers as a mentor with Connections Ottawa Mentorship Program (COMP) for Internationally Educated Professionals and Skilled Workers.

### **What do you believe are the most important assets or characteristics of a good nurse leader?**

I believe that what distinguishes good nurse leaders from great nurse leaders is the ability to create a compelling vision of what could be and to move people to want to go there. A great nurse leader is able to lead people to places they would

not likely have ever thought they could go on their own. Excellent nurse leaders are honest, truthful, passionate, forward-thinking, creative, resilient and driven. They are thorough and they don't take short-cuts. They have a tremendous ability to synthesize large amounts of information from various perspectives to frame a problem or situation in order to get to the root of the matter. They may be the ones to create the vision, but they trust the people they work with to determine the best way to get there. They never lose sight of the ultimate goal but are flexible in how they achieve it. They are acutely self-aware and introspective. They bring out the best in others by being clear about their expectations, by supporting others to take risks and to push the limits. Great nurse leaders believe, and instill in others the belief, that there is always another option, another strategy, another hand to play, to improve situations, no matter how bad things may seem.

**How would you describe your leadership style, and why does it work for your organization?**

I have learned over time that to be a great leader, you need to be able to draw on several different leadership styles. No one style will be effective in every situation. The skill is in knowing which style to use in a given instance. So, there are times when my style may be more directive, for example, in a crisis, when the stakes are high or when patient safety is a concern. At other times, my style is more consultative, for instance, when looking for creative ways to resolve a long-standing problem. Having said this, however, my predominant style is to lead by example. I am consistent in my messaging and clear about my expectations. I meet conflict head on so that it can be dealt with before it escalates. I see my leadership role as a facilitator, that is, someone who can point people in the right direction, open doors and provide feedback, all the while allowing people to take risks, try new strategies and experiment. I think that has served my organization well in that it helps build capacity and develop future great leaders. It also fosters autonomy and responsibility.

**You mentioned that you have had many mentors throughout your career. Can you tell us about one or two of these and the lessons they shared with you?**

When I was completing my baccalaureate in nursing at McGill University, I was fortunate to interact with professors who shaped the way I see the role of the nurse and the relationship she has with patients. For instance, one day I was discussing a patient with Margaret Hooton, who was supervising my clinical placement at the time. I explained my assessment findings and my plan of interventions.

I concluded by telling her that this was really an interesting case. She quickly told me that I should never refer to the people I was working with as "cases." They were persons. Since then, I am constantly reminded that my relationship with patients – and, in fact, with my other clients, for example, the nurses I work with – are based on a desire to know the person and never to assume that I might understand how

they are feeling or thinking. This has taught me to ask questions, to listen to the answers and to value the very privileged relationship that nurses enjoy with their clients, whomever they may be.

I was extremely fortunate to work with Dr. Donna Wells during my master's program at the University of Toronto and for several years afterwards. Donna taught me to strive for excellence and never to accept anything less than what I was capable of accomplishing. She was incredibly generous with her time and opened many doors for me. For example, when we co-authored an article together, she allowed me to be first author – and it wasn't because "L" comes before "W"! She was unselfish and never hesitated to share her accomplishments. This truly has taught me what a good mentor – and, in fact, what a good nurse leader – is, that is, someone who will support others in their learning and development by doing with them, not for them, and better yet, by allowing them to take risks and to learn from their trials.

Finally, I am incredibly grateful to have Dr. Souraya Sidani as a mentor. Even though she is truly one of the brightest minds in nursing and an expert in her field, she has always treated me as an equal. This has taught me to value everyone's contribution and to be open to all that people bring to their work, to projects, to the table.

### **What have you found most interesting during your career? What has been your most serious challenge?**

I believe that every role I have ever occupied throughout my career has prepared me for the next one. Each position has taught me something that has helped me in the next. I believe that one should always be attentive to the lessons that experiences can bring, even though they may not always be obvious at the time. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of my career has been to see how a single person can make a difference, can have an impact and can set in motion a series of events that lead to change, however small or profound.

I have enjoyed every aspect of my career this far, but a part of my career that I look upon with great joy is when I worked as a home visiting nurse. Being invited into people's homes to provide at times very intimate care really marked how I think of nursing. It is a privilege to provide nursing care to people, and this could not be more apparent than when you are on their turf, outside your comfort zone, asking them for direction regarding how they like things to be done.

I think one of the greatest challenges faced by many nurse leaders lies in the sheer magnitude of the role. There are multiple demands, competing priorities, numerous stakeholders, and it is at times challenging to deliver to everyone's level of expectations. It can at times be challenging not to lose oneself or the balance in one's life. In my role as nurse leader, I feel a tremendous sense of responsibility for

the quality of the care nurses deliver, and that can weigh heavily at times.

**What key piece of advice would you like to share with aspiring leaders?**

To be a great leader you need to be credible. It sounds simple enough, but knowing your stuff really is critical. This means that you take the time to research an issue fully before making a decision or expressing an opinion. It is important to be able to ask the right questions. It helps to talk less and listen more. Being credible also

means having the ability to communicate eloquently, clearly and effectively. Many great initiatives fail because the leader did not communicate clearly the goal, the purpose or the desired end. Another piece of advice to aspiring leaders would be to know themselves and never to lose sight of their passion, of what gives meaning to their life. I would also tell them to take care of themselves: It takes energy, strength and resilience to lead, and good leaders need to have a balanced life and a healthy mind, body and spirit.

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**This issue: In Conversation with Susan VanDeVelde-Coke**

Susan VanDeVelde-Coke, RN, MA, MBA, PhD, is Executive Vice President, Programs/Chief, Health Professions and Nursing Executive, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, Toronto. In this interview, Dr. Coke reflects on the state of nursing today from the perspective of a senior nurse administrator.



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