

Never an Old School Nurse

A nurse for nearly 60 years — and one of the state's first nurse practitioners — Pat Oriet has made a life of educating patients about health care

BY NANCY KESSLER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE



It's

A SAFE BET THAT THERE ISN'T A WOMAN IN BOZEMAN whose health care hasn't been improved by the efforts

and energy of Pat Oriet.

From working at the Montana State University Student Health Center to private practice, teaching medical students to middle schoolers, presenting to women's business groups or rural farm wives, Oriet has affected literally thousands of Montana women. And this perhaps "most senior citizen nurse in the community" isn't done yet.

"I started talking about retirement at age 62," laughed Oriet, who turned 79 in October, "and I'm still thinking about it. I don't have a career I can separate from my life. My life and my career are me."

A nurse since 1953, Oriet has been a Certified Women's Health Nurse Practitioner since 1984. She was one of the first nurse practitioners in the state to work in a doctor's office and one of the first to be granted the authority to write prescriptions. Oriet now sees patients about eight days a month at Bozeman OB/GYN.

Back in 1949, however, after graduating from Havre High School, the Wisconsin native went into nursing almost by default. "Did we have any choice in those days?" Oriet asked. "You either went into teaching or nursing. And there were scholarships for nursing then from the Anaconda Copper Company. That \$50 paid for all my books, fees and tuition."

Armed with a nursing diploma from Montana State College in 1952, Oriet went to work at a hospital in Great Falls in pediatrics. She soon met and married her husband, Bill. They had three children and then moved to Bozeman five years later, where two more children were born.

"I would have stayed in pediatrics if I had stayed at the hospital," Oriet said. But with five

nurse, as a fill-in and with Red Cross.

"There were no recovery rooms or ICUs in hospitals back then, so families hired private-duty nurses to care for patients after surgery," she recalled.

By the late 1960s, federal grants aimed at ending a nationwide nursing shortage made it possible for Oriet to also obtain her bachelor's degree in nursing at MSU. She took a job as a registered nurse at the Student Health Center in 1968, which back then operated its own lab, pharmacy and infirmary, and offered radiology, surgery, orthopedic and clinical services. Weekend work meant she was the only nurse on duty, which really honed her medical skills.

Oriet remembers both the small size of her first paycheck — \$499 for a

A longtime advocate for women's health, Pat Oriet, at 79 years old, is still helping patients stay healthy. Below, Oriet began her nursing career in Great Falls in 1952.



her own women's health center. "The program educated girls about their bodies, gave them a complete exam and prescribed pills," she said. "It started these girls in what my opinion is ideal: annual gynecological exams."

Oriet and her colleagues developed all their own educational materials, since none were available. She also did research for family planning organizations.

"This was where I got some of my first women's health education," Oriet recalled. "We held workshops to teach ourselves... We thought if we can teach one student, then accurate information would spread."

Word indeed spread through campus, and soon Oriet was speaking to nursing classes about contraception and later, sexually transmitted diseases. In presentations to dorm residents, she added information on breast cancer and eating disorders. Initially, those talks couldn't be co-ed, until Oriet was able to convince Student Affairs "it takes two to tango," she said.

Sororities and fraternities invited her to address their members, and Oriet found the boys particularly interested in breast cancer. "Some of them had mothers with the disease, and I gave them the kind of information they were not comfortable asking the doctor," she said.

As health concerns changed and more people learned of her expertise, Oriet addressed community groups on these issues and more, such as anorexia and herpes. Through PACT, Parents and Adolescents Can Talk, Oriet met with middle school students to talk about STDs and basic anatomy.

"I try to approach every health issue positively," she said about her success in connecting with people of all ages. "Without a sense of humor, nobody should be in the health care world."

Oriet continued expanding her skills and experience, first dealing with older women students' health issues, and then working for two summers at Bozeman OB/GYN.

"It was serendipity that I ended up in the Women's Health Center," she said. "It became my love. But after 17 years, I liked the work in a private office, the diversity and obstetrics," she said. And, when her liability insurance jumped 1,000 percent in 1987, she decided to move permanently to the private practice, where she encountered more patients going through the change of life.

"Eventually I became known as the menopause queen," Oriet said. "I offered the first ever community programs on menopause, in about 1992, and had 75 to 100 at the first two workshops, because nobody else was doing it." By 2000, Oriet was certified by the North American Menopause Society as a Menopause Practitioner.

Always concerned with health education, she maintained her university presence by becoming a

got me in trouble as a student nurse. car school program in the early 1990s, teaching future physicians how to do breast examinations. In fact, every year she is a model for the doctors-to-be.

"It gives them reassurance in how to do a good exam, a comfort level knowing it's okay to touch a breast," Oriet said. "If they learn nothing else in women's health, they have to put their skills, their knowledge in the patient's context. Good communication is so important to good health care, how you share information and how you listen to the patient."

"I don't think a caregiver should ever see a patient where they don't find that one moment to educate," Oriet added. "Health education has to be part of health care."

That's one reason she joined MSU's Women to Women research project in 2000. The 10-year study was designed to provide health education and social support to middle-age rural women with chronic illnesses, using telecommunications to promote self-management of their conditions. Oriet focused on the transition years from child-bearing to menopause.

As if that weren't enough, last year Oriet was an advisor to a Film & Television graduate student working on a documentary about premenstrual symptoms, and is advising another student this year. She also is on the board of the Young Parenting Group and Bridger Clinic, is a member of the College of Nursing Dean's Advisory Group and Sigma Theta Tau International — the honor society for nursing, and in 2003 received an MSU Alumni Association Centennial Achievement Award.

"I have the sense that my gung-ho enthusiasm has been channeled well into the projects I do," she smiled.

Oriet credits her hard-working mother and grandmother, several inspiring teachers and a school teacher great-aunt who was a women's liber

Back then, when Oriet saw babies dying of polio, and women institutionalized at Warm Springs Mental Hospital for menopausal depression and receiving shock therapy because there were no anti-depressant drugs, she was inspired to be part of the progressive change in health care and to become a role model for her own students.


"I've had the good fortune to see many positive changes in medicine in my years," Oriet continued. "Now we're seeing major changes in treatments and therapies, surgical procedures and women's care," Oriet said. "Finally, we are allowing women to make health choices for themselves."

Nancy Kessler is a freelance writer in Livingston.

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