

# Creating Futures

Nurses at Newton-Wellesley Hospital help younger patients find the benefits of bariatric surgery

BY KATHLEEN A. WATON

**D**enise A. Nietzel, BSN, RN, CBN, can relate personally and professionally to treating obesity and caring for bariatric patients.

Morbidly obese at 17, the ambulatory coordinator at Newton-Wellesley Hospital's Center for Weight Loss Surgery in Newton, MA, has struggled with weight most of her adult life.

Today, Nietzel is living proof of the success of bariatric surgery and she and three other nurses help obese patients, including young adults, live healthier lives. "Having lived a life of being obese, I can help others understand they've got to make change now or it's going to be even harder later," she said.

## Ounce of Prevention

Only 2 percent of her patient population is in the 18- to 25-year-old range, but research shows bariatric surgery is "something you should do sooner, rather than later," Nietzel said. "You're healthier, in better shape for surgery and patients do well."

Done early, surgery can prevent or eliminate diabetes, reduce stress on joints and prevent hypertension—and avoid painful psychosocial trauma. "It's exciting to be in a field of nursing which can really prevent the diseases we were trained to treat," Nietzel said.

Karen Norowski, BSN, RN, bariatric

care coordinator at Winthrop-University Hospital, Mineola, NY, has seen the preventive benefits of surgery at a young age.

"If we intervene early, we can really change the social aspect for patients because there are so many prejudices against people of size. There's extreme social pressure for any young person. Now add to it they can't shop where friends shop or worrying that they can't fit into movie seats."

Some high school students who are morbidly obese "can't even see a future for themselves," Nietzel said. Others realize it is very difficult to get a job in this market if "you don't feel good about yourself or present yourself well and your lack of self-esteem shows through in some interviews. Perhaps they can't fit in a uniform, pass the physical or stand for 3-4 hours in a job. Sometimes they want a different life for themselves in terms of physical capabilities and we have to point out they have medical issues that need to be stabilized first."

Bariatric patients have several surgery options, including laparoscopic gastric banding, laparoscopic Roux-en-Y gastric bypass and minimally invasive sleeve gastrectomy, which drastically reduces the size of the stomach. Winthrop-University Hospital is planning to begin research this year to study how adolescents fare with gastric banding. "There's not a lot of research on adolescents undergoing bariatric surgery," Norowski said, "so it's an untapped niche."

## No Quick Fix

The criteria for the procedure is even "more stringent" than for an adult patient population, she said. Patients must have a BMI greater than 40, which equates to 100

**DEDICATED TO HEALTH:** The team at Newton-Wellesley Hospital's Center for Weight Loss Surgery includes, from left: Sally Wade, RN-FA, CNOR, Nancy Malone, RN, Renee Waite, RN-FA, CNOR, Nicole Caruso, MA, and Denise Nietzel, BSN, RN, CBN. *courtesy Newton-Wellesley Hospital*

pounds overweight. Participants must have endocrine clearance showing they are at the end of their growth phase. Plus, patients must show "psychological understanding" of what is required, including following a daily diet and maintaining consistent exercise.

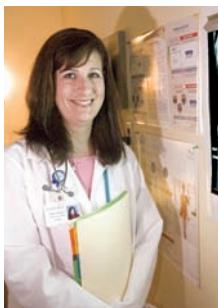
Young adults, as all bariatric patients, must understand the procedure is no "quick fix," but requires a major lifestyle change. They also must show documentation that they have failed medical management and tried various weight loss programs.

The patient's commitment is "absolutely essential" for the weight loss to be sustainable, Nietzel said. "Surgery is the easy part. The hard part is after [surgery], doing what you need to do, and handling peer pressure and body image."

At Winthrop, the process usually lasts approximately 6 months because the workup process is "very rigorous," Norowski said, "and [patients] are usually going to school at the time." Patients undergo endocrine and psychological evaluations and visit a nutritionist a couple of times. They also are encouraged to attend support groups with their family.

"We try to reeducate everyone," Norowski said, "because it's very difficult to have four people in a house and only one on a diet." Sometimes the family is "all obese with multiple comorbidities and members rally around the young person and say 'we're not going to let this happen to you,'" Nietzel said.

Smoking and drinking are verboten, but are not usually problems. "The young peo-



**STARTING EARLY:** Karen Norowski, BSN, RN, bariatric care coordinator at Winthrop-University Hospital, helps young adults create healthier lives. *courtesy Winthrop-University Hospital*

## □ CREATING

ple who come through the program are highly motivated,” Norowski said. “If they are not mentally ready to make the lifestyle change, bariatric surgery is not a good idea. You don’t want the patient who is being pushed by mom to get the operation. You want patients who wants it for themselves.”

### Childbearing Hope

Norowski does not see many differences in how boys and girls fare in bariatric surgery, “except it’s more socially acceptable for a boy

patients lose the weight, they are usually able to get pregnant postop,” Norowski said.

Nietzel finds the biggest challenges working with the young patient population is getting them to understand that “some of the medical issues discovered by their PCPs puts their health and life at risk. It’s very difficult for some to conceptualize that they could have a stroke or heart attack or that their lifespan is already diminished by 8-10 years.”

### Measuring Success

Success in the programs at both bariatric surgery centers of excellence is described or measured in various ways. Success for a patient at Newton-Wellesley is usually defined in terms of someone losing 50-60 percent of their extra weight and maintaining the weight loss for 5 years.

“Success can be someone who gets their BMI under 35, and has all the numbers line up, Nietzel said. “With younger people, true success is sustaining the weight loss through their young adult and older adult years. We’re looking for long-term healthy lives.”

Norowski calls success for any bariatric patient, “getting to a weight where it is not holding them back from anything. Some patients will say ‘I only lost 4 pounds this month,’ but if you lose 4 pounds for 12 months, that’s 48 pounds, there aren’t many diets that would let you lose 50 pounds a year and be able to keep it off.”

Success, she said, can also be defined in terms of the ability to bend over and tie shoes or sit behind a car’s steering wheel without a seat belt extender. “It really depends on what the patient’s expectations are and we need to make sure goals are realistic.”

Caring for bariatric patients, particularly a young population, requires special qualifications and qualities in nurses. “It involves a lot more than understanding the surgery,” said Norowski, who was an ICU nurse for 8 years before taking her current position. “The first thing is to understand your own personal bias so you can overcome it. Then you need to understand what the patients undergo every day. Stigma and social ridicule influence every aspect of their life. That extra bit of empathy and consideration makes bariatric nursing a field unto itself.”

### Passion for Care

Nurses must understand that obesity is a disease and “the sooner you can treat it, and help someone identify that” the better, Nietzel said. Nursing care requires sensitivity — to self-esteem, ultimate goals and motivations — but that “comes easily to people who are passionate.”

And the nurses are passionate about working with young bariatric patients and seeing the changes after surgery. Norowski described a 17-year old gastric bypass patient who lost approximately 130 pounds. “She’s a completely different person,” Norowski said. “She’s gone from a quiet wallflower to a very outgoing, chatty, vivacious girl.”

“Bariatric nursing is an upcoming specialty,” Nietzel said. “It’s very challenging. You have to be very knowledgeable about the pathophysiology, really understand and want to be part of the journey that patients will go on and a global thinker. It is so incredibly rewarding because you can really make a difference in someone’s life early on.” ■

Kathleen A. Waton is a frequent contributor to *ADVANCE*.

**‘Surgery is the easy part. The hard part is ... doing what you need to do, and handling peer pressure and body image.’**

— Denise Nietzel, BSN, RN, CBN

to be heavier than a girl. Boys aren’t looking at magazines thinking ‘I wish I were that thin’ whereas teenage girls are. That’s a big psychological issue.”

The extra weight does affect childbearing for girls, however. Polycystic ovarian syndrome is common in morbidly obese girls, changing their hormones and making some infertile. “When the

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