

An Interview with Jennifer Payton, President of the American Nephrology Nurses Association, 2023-2024

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Beth Ulrich: I'm Beth Ulrich, Editor-in-Chief of the *Nephrology Nursing Journal*. It's my pleasure today to interview Jennifer Payton the incoming President of ANNA. Jennifer, welcome.

Jennifer Payton: It's my pleasure, Beth.

Beth Ulrich: Let's start at the beginning. Where did you grow up? Where's home?

Jennifer Payton: Home has been quite a few different places. I was born in Indiana. Most of the time, when I talked about home, it's usually Kentucky. That's where I grew up – in a little small town in Kentucky – until I got married. I married my high school sweetheart. He was in the Marine Corps. He's retired now, but he was active duty in the Marine Corps. We moved around a few different times, and then when he retired, we ended up in Goose Creek, South Carolina near Charleston.

Beth Ulrich: When did you decide to become a nurse?

Jennifer Payton: I actually decided to become a nurse when I was in high school. A nurse anesthetist came and did a talk for the for the whole school. And I was like, oh, that sounds really interesting. I became a nurse, and then never became a nurse anesthetist, but I ended up as a nephrology nurse. And I don't regret it one little bit.

Beth Ulrich: Where did you go to nursing school?

Jennifer Payton: I started out at Eastern Kentucky University working on my bachelor's degree, and then I ended up moving to North Carolina. The Marine Corps decided that's where we needed to be, so I ended up finishing my Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Later on, I went back and got my master's degree in Healthcare Administration at Bellevue University.

Beth Ulrich: What was your path in nephrology nursing?

Editor-in-Chief's Note: I had the privilege of interviewing Jennifer Payton, who becomes the President of the American Nephrology Nurses Association (ANNA) on May 9, 2023. This is a transcript of the interview recorded on March 30, 2023. The audio version of the interview is available as part of the NNJExtra podcast.

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Jennifer Payton: I started out as a med-surg nurse in the hospital because that's what – at the time – I was told you had to do. So that's how I started. When we moved, I had to find a new job, and I went to the hospitals because that's what I knew. And they said, oh, you are one week shy of a year's experience, so we're going to pay you the same as a new grad. And I said, oh no, you're not! So I started looking for other jobs, and I found an ad from a dialysis unit. I walked in, did an interview, they hired me on the spot, and I've never left nephrology.

Beth Ulrich: What was that job? Were you in a hemodialysis unit or what was your nephrology job?

Jennifer Payton: My first nephrology job was in an outpatient hemodialysis unit. I was a staff nurse.

Beth Ulrich: The way you came into nephrology nursing sounds a lot like how I came into it – See one, do one, teach one.

Jennifer Payton: Yes, very much so.

Beth Ulrich: Except with mine it was – See one, do one, and teach one to our first home dialysis patient.

Jennifer Payton: Oh, wow.

Beth Ulrich: They said, "You're hired. We'll teach you, and then you start the home dialysis program." It makes me smile now when people think home dialysis is a new thing.

Jennifer Payton: I eventually went into home dialysis as well. I started out as a staff nurse, and then it wasn't very long until I became the manager of an outpatient hemodialysis unit – a small one that had about 12 stations – and then I moved up to a couple of larger units and did that for quite a few years. Then I moved into pharma,

where I became a clinical educator for some anemia products. I did that for several years, and then I became a home program coordinator, where I did peritoneal dialysis. I had about 23 patients at the time when I took over the program, and then we started home hemodialysis in the area. There wasn't anywhere near us that was doing home hemodialysis. After that, I became a nurse educator in hemodialysis. I had eight dialysis units in the area where I did education for the nurses and the patient care techs; everyone who started new or needed annual competencies. Then I even did a stint as a quality system consultant with a medical device company for nephrology products. And I worked with all the engineers – the one nurse with all the engineers – talking about corrective and preventative action for the FDA side of things for the manufacturing of dialysis products. And then, about four-and-a-half years ago, I became a surveyor with an accreditation organization, where I recently became the director of regulatory compliance, acting as a liaison between CMS and the clinics that we survey.

Beth Ulrich: You've had a really interesting career! Did you ever think back then that this is where you'd end up?

Jennifer Payton: No! But from the day I walked into that first dialysis clinic, I've not left nephrology, but I've done lots of things, and I've worn many hats.

Beth Ulrich: I think that's one of the things a lot of people don't realize about nephrology nursing – How many hats you can wear.

Jennifer Payton: Yes! And I haven't even touched on many of them. I know I haven't done in-center or acute dialysis or transplant. There are so many other avenues that I've never even touched. I've had quite a full career of different opportunities in nephrology.

Beth Ulrich: How long have you been an active member of ANNA?

Jennifer Payton: As long as I can remember. I was getting ready to give you a year, but we'll just stay a long time. When I started out in a dialysis clinic, the manager told me that I needed to join ANNA for professional development. She was my boss, so I said okay. I didn't know much about ANNA at the time, but I joined, and a few years later I became a chapter officer in the Palmetto chapter.

Beth Ulrich: You've been active in ANNA over the years, and now you're about to become its President. What was your path from local chapter officer to being President of ANNA?

Jennifer Payton: I was a chapter officer for many years. I started out as a President-Elect and then became President, and I believe I was Treasurer and maybe even Secretary for a while. Then I moved on, and my path went a little toward the health policy side. In the beginning, I was the state health policy person, and then I was the Southeast Region health policy advisor and on the Health Policy Committee. We don't even have regions and advisors anymore, but I did that for a couple of years

and got very passionate about health policy with the Health Policy Committee, and that was in the early days of ANNA becoming very active in advocacy. It was very exciting to be part of that. And then I've been a speaker many times at national meetings. I was a member and a chair of the Awards and Scholarships Committee. I was on the Leadership Committee for a while. I decided I wanted to be on the Board of Directors. I ran three different times and the third time was the charm. I became the ANNA National Secretary. I served for two terms (four years) as Secretary, and then I rolled off of the ANNA Board of Directors for a little while and became a member of the *Nephrology Nursing Journal* Editorial Board. Then I decided it was time to run for President.

Beth Ulrich: What made you want to run for President of a national nursing association?

Jennifer Payton: ANNA has given me so much that I want to give back. I want to give back and see what I can give to the nephrology nurses who are members and to the whole nephrology nursing community. I think as an association, we need to give back. One of my goals for the year is to focus on self-care and the mental health of our nephrology nurses. I think that's something we haven't talked a whole lot about, and I think it's something very important that we need to put in the forefront right now. With the way the nursing community is and with the staffing shortage that we have right now, it's very important to focus on self-care and mental health.

Beth Ulrich: I think you're exactly right. There's a lot of room for us to help nurses with self-care and to provide ways that they can do self-care. That's a very important thing to contribute. Speaking of where we are right now, there are lots of opportunities and lots of challenges today in health care and nursing in general and in nephrology. Can you talk a minute about what you think the opportunities and challenges are to individual nephrology nurses, nephrology, nursing in general. Then maybe talk about what the opportunities and challenges are for ANNA right now.

Jennifer Payton: The biggest challenge I see right now for nephrology nurses is burnout and mental health. The opportunity is mentoring other nurses or nursing students, trying to get more people into nursing in general, but also into nephrology nursing. I think there's a big opportunity for us to partner with some of the dialysis organizations and really work toward getting more people into the field of nephrology. The biggest opportunities and challenges for nephrology nursing in general are with the staffing crisis.

You know, it's not even a staffing issue anymore; we're in crisis. It's not the first staffing crisis we've ever been in, but we're definitely in one right now. They're having to close dialysis clinics temporarily and some permanent.

I think the nursing staffing crisis is one of our challenges, but the opportunity is focusing on younger nurses, on working with nursing students and working with nephrology organizations. We can work with the dialysis

organizations to start with, starting fellowship programs and internships. I knew nothing about dialysis when I walked into that first dialysis clinic. I don't even remember hearing the word in nursing school. We've got a long road ahead, and I think there are definitely some opportunities to work with our partners in the dialysis clinics to try to work on getting those younger nurses and nursing students into nephrology so they can see all of the different aspects that there are.

Beth Ulrich: I think you have a really unique perspective in your current role and the surveyor role you've been in the last four or five years because you've been able to see what's going on across the country, not just in one unit or several units in an area. I think that brings to us into the association a broad view of what's really happening out there. You know what people are seeing on the front lines.

Jennifer Payton: Thank you. We see a lot. I've been all over the country doing surveys, and we see trends. We're seeing staffing issues, and some of these other issues across any size dialysis clinic in any state. It's happening everywhere.

Beth Ulrich: What are the opportunities for ANNA and the challenges for ANNA going into this coming year?

Jennifer Payton: The biggest challenge is attracting and retaining our members. We have members who are retiring every day and may or may not keep their membership. And then we have young nurses who don't know what nephrology is, or even if they do know what nephrology is, and they're in dialysis or nephrology in some aspect, they don't understand the opportunities there are with ANNA and what they get out of it. But I think the opportunity for us again is partnering with those dialysis organizations to help them encourage their employees to become members of ANNA for their professional development.

Beth Ulrich: ANNA has always been front and center in caring about the quality of care for patients. What do you think are our opportunities and our challenges to help ensure that we provide quality care for patients?

Jennifer Payton: ANNA does a very good job with education. We need to get the message out that ANNA is where you need to come to get your education. We have textbooks, we have journals, we have articles that you can read. We have webinars, we have presentations and conventions that we're where you need to come to get your information for nephrology nursing, and for the care and quality of the care we give to patients.

Beth Ulrich: Did you have mentors in your nephrology career?

Jennifer Payton: I've had a lot of mentors, probably more than I can count or remember right this second. I had Deborah Brooks. She's the first person who told me, "You can write. Here's a book, read it, and write a little

something about it." Now I've written multiple articles for the *Nephrology Nursing Journal*, I've been an author for the *Contemporary Nephrology Nursing* textbook, and I'm on the journal's Editorial Board. That was just from Deborah believing in me and telling me that I could do it. Cindy Richards has been a huge mentor to me about what it is to be a leader and how to be a leader with care and compassion and kindness always. Glenda Payne been a great mentor of mine. Angie Kurosaka has helped me this past year and is helping me to become the kind of President I want to be. I've just had more mentors than I can even think of.

Beth Ulrich: Everybody needs mentors and a then to be a mentor, to give back mentoring too. I know there are people that you mentor all the time and that's a good model for all of us.

Here's an obvious question. Why should nurses choose nephrology nursing as a specialty? They have so many options right now.

Jennifer Payton: They do have so many options, but they have so many options in nephrology as well. Nephrology is a specialty, but there are so many sub-specialties inside of nephrology. So they can start out in dialysis and then go into disease management or go into transplant or case management. The list just goes on and on of all the different opportunities. And it's chronic disease management, so it's not like they're treating someone for the flu, and the patient's going to get better and go home; you may never see them again. You're with these patients for large periods of their life and helping them through some very difficult periods in their life. It's very important to know that and to know that you make a difference in the lives of patients at all different stages of kidney disease.

Beth Ulrich: Before we end, is there anything else you want to share with our audience?

Jennifer Payton: I'm so excited to become ANNA's President! It's going to be extra special since the current ANNA President is one of my one of my best friends. I'm going to try really hard not to cry when she hands me the Vision Crystal. I have enjoyed nephrology nursing so much, and I hope to continue to have new opportunities as the years go on. I love nephrology nursing because of the difference we can make in the lives of patients with kidney disease.

Beth Ulrich: Jennifer, thank you so much for spending time with us today and doing this interview. We really look forward to your leadership as President of ANNA.

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