

Ahwatukee nurse provides a more personal health-care option

by **Cathryn Creno** - May. 4, 2009 01:50 PM
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Neither Kym nor Dave Peters has seen a general-practice doctor in 15 years. But the Ahwatukee Foothills couple says that's not because they ignore their health.

They began seeing registered nurse practitioner Agnes Oblas in the early 1990s, when she worked in a traditional medical office.

In 2001, when Oblas opened a private practice in Ahwatukee, they followed her. The Peterses haven't looked back.

"Agie is our primary-care NP," Kym said. Sometimes "we see specialists who communicate their findings to her. Then Agie will follow up to make sure the treatment is correct."



Tom Tingle / The Arizona Republic

Nurse practitioner Agnes Oblas works in her Ahwatukee office.

These days it's common for Arizonans to go to a doctor's office but receive care from a nurse practitioner - a registered nurse with extra training and certification to order tests, write prescriptions and refer patients to medical specialists.

But only a handful of Arizona nurse practitioners have gone solo. About 4 percent of Arizona's 3,017 nurse practitioners take advantage of a state law that permits them to open a practice without a doctor's supervision, said Denise Link, associate dean for clinical practice and community partnerships for Arizona State University's College of Nursing.

The pluses and minuses of running a private practice are the same for a nurse practitioner as they are for a doctor or any small business owner, Link said.

On the up side, the nurse practitioner is his or her own boss, can determine how much time to spend with each patient and can even specialize in certain types of medicine, such as mental health or women's health care. The down side is that no one pays the nurse practitioner a salary. They have to network and market themselves to generate business, just like a private-practice doctor.

Oblas said building her practice, which she opened after the physicians group she worked with in the 1990s disbanded, has been like rolling a "very slow snowball."

For one thing, her appointments last 30 to 60 minutes, so she sees just five to seven patients a day. Many physicians will see that many people within in a few hours.

"I really want to be a Sherlock Holmes of medical care," she said. "I sit with people and really listen. And then we work out a plan. Say someone is a truck driver with diabetes. How does that person test their blood sugar on the road? We make the treatment plan fit the person's life." Kym Peters believes she takes fewer medications because Oblas "takes her time and often will find alternative ways to remedy an ailment" like heartburn or headaches.

"She will ask further questions to find the root of the cause and then treat the symptoms," Peters said. Another challenge for Oblas has been convincing some patients who come to her through insurance-plan referrals that she really can order tests and write prescriptions without a doctor looking over her shoulder.

"Arizona is one of the few states in the nation where nurse practitioners are considered independent health-care providers," Oblas said.

"So people who are new are a little curious. The public still believes nurse practitioners have to work with physicians. But that's the association I am trying to break."

Oblas, 62, said she has been fascinated with medicine and the human body since age 7, when she was hospitalized with swollen glands. She studied nursing at the University of Minnesota, she said, because few women of her generation considered going to medical school.

She later earned master's degrees in nursing from both Boston College and Simmons College, also in Boston, then earned her nurse practitioner certification in Massachusetts in 1980.

"Agie started reforming access to health care long before it was fashionable," said Janet Woldt, associate dean for academic assessment at the A.T. Still University Arizona School of Dentistry and Oral Health in Mesa.

Woldt said she found Oblas by searching the Internet after moving to Arizona from Iowa five years ago. She said she was treated by nurse practitioners in Iowa and hoped to get the same type of care in here.

"Agie is my primary-care health-care professional," she said. "Nurse practitioners and physician assistants are trained to be good listeners, so they can effectively serve their patients. For example, she helped me to uncover that I was suffering from mild depression, and treated me as such. Other health-care providers have told me things like, 'What do you expect? You're tired because you're 40 years old.' Agie helps to get to the bottom of the issue."