

A Profession's Journey toward Wellness...

Four years ago, as I began my term as AANA Region 2 director, our profession faced many challenges. Our members, elected leaders, and staff had recently endured a long and difficult battle to secure the opportunity for individual states to opt out of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) requirement for physician supervision of nurse anesthetists. Just a month earlier, President Rodney Lester, CRNA, PhD, had marshaled AANA resources to manage the fallout from the news that a nurse anesthetist in Oklahoma had been accused of reusing needles and syringes and was believed to have inoculated dozens of patients with hepatitis C virus. Then, at 8:54 p.m. on Oct.31, I received a brief three-sentence email from Rita Rupp, RN, MA, former special assistant to the AANA executive director, saying that AANA Past President Jan Stewart, CRNA, ARNP, had died unexpectedly. On that day the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists changed forever.



Terry Wicks,
CRNA, MHS

Jan Stewart's daughter, Sarah, and her family could have kept their knowledge that Jan had died from an accidental self-administered overdose of sufentanil a secret, but they instead chose to help the AANA open the door to the realization that the anesthesia community had a very serious wellness and chemical dependency problem. That led to the realization that no one is immune from the risk, and when that risk is ignored, our whole profession loses.

Wellness Program Beginnings

Early in his term as AANA President, Tom McKibban, CRNA, MS, convened the Wellness Blue Ribbon Panel to investigate wellness issues, develop plans to enhance member health and well-being, and address the overshadowing issue of chemical dependency in the anesthesia community. Members of that panel included Brent Sommer, CRNA, MPHA, film writer and producer Dirk Wales, and Mike Roizen, MD. One of the most memorable aspects during the first year of the project was the production of the DVD titled *About Wellness*, which was showcased during the first Jan Stewart Lecture series presentation at the Annual Meeting in Seattle, Wash., Jan's home. In this moving and eye-opening vignette Sarah Stewart Gomes shared her experience with her mother's chemical dependency along with her wish—one that she also believed would be Jan's—that we give each other permission to care for one another, recognize each other's vulnerability, and take the necessary steps to prevent untimely and unnecessary deaths from chemical dependency.

Four years later we have taken enormous strides to address the wellness of our profession. The Jan Stewart Memorial Lecture series continues and has addressed numerous topics for improving the quality of life for CRNAs, given us insights into the brain pathway changes that occur when chemical dependency occurs, and shown us the value of laughter for adding joy to our lives. The *Wearing Masks* DVD series has been completed and includes the original *Wearing Masks*, *Wearing Masks Ten Years Later*, *Hope: The Tim Glidden Story*, *Alterations of Brain Pathways*,

The Spectrum of Intervention, and *The Challenge of Re-entry*. I would recommend without reservation that every nurse anesthetist, nurse anesthesia student, anesthesia resident, attending anesthesiologist, and their families take the time to carefully watch these important programs. We know now that every anesthesia provider, irrespective of credentials, experience, or responsibilities, can become a victim of chemical dependency when they experience unmanageable physical or emotional pain, unrelenting stress, or other life experiences that increase their vulnerability.

Wellness Program Progress

The opportunity to participate in a Wellness Self Assessment is now available to all members on the AANA website through a partnership with RealAge, founded by AANA Wellness Panel member Mike Roizen, MD. This confidential assessment has been taken by hundreds of AANA members and associate members. The Wellness site will eventually address stress relief, substance abuse, diet and exercise, workplace issues, and wellness-enhancement suggestions.

This year the Wellness Program has been moved under the umbrella of the Council for Public Interest in Anesthesia, where it is staffed by Sandra Tunajek, CRNA, DNP. This seems like an ideal partnership for wellness because of the need to maintain a fit and healthy workforce to ensure that the patients we care for have continued access to safe, timely, and cost-effective anesthesia care. During the next few months the support and training of peer assistance advisors will be enhanced in order to increase their effectiveness and provide a clearer framework for the tremendously important work that they do.

Thank You, Jan and Sarah

Looking back, I think that Jan Stewart would be proud of the work that we have done and the distance that we have come in the last four years. I think also that she would push us to do more to support and nurture each other, to care and watch over one another, and to continue to be the unquestioned leaders in creating and maintaining wellness in the anesthesia community. Thank you, Jan and Sarah, for your gift of honesty and caring; we are all better for it.



Jan and daughter Sarah