

Frontier Medicine

Registered nurse stays flexible to deal with all kinds of emergency ailments

By B. Marie Jarreau-Danner



Registered nurse Sam Palmer checks medical equipment used in the emergency department of Harney District Hospital in Burns.

Growing up just outside of John Day, a large part of Sam Palmer's life was spent with his family deep in the piney woods nearby.

Whether camping, hunting, hiking, fishing or seeking out the choicest mushrooms, he learned a great deal about the woods from his dad, Frank.

Sam grew up with a love of the woodland and a sense of stewardship that comes with a lifelong connection to the land.

He still maintains a connection to the forest, but it was an unusual turn that a career as a registered nurse became his life's work.

Sam has worked at a variety of hospitals and health-care facilities in the Northwest. He also served as a flight nurse in Nevada. For the past five years, he's worked as a registered nurse at Harney District Hospital in Burns, focusing on emergency medicine.

His mom, Dorothy, inadvertently started him on that divergent career path.

"It was winter, and I was in high school when my mom, a police dispatcher, called to get me out of class to help drive a patient to the hospital in Bend," Sam says. "At that time, none of the emergency medical service (EMS) women on duty knew how to put on tire chains."

It wouldn't be the last time Sam was called into service. He knew from being in the company of those who worked to save lives that he wanted a career in medicine.

He watched and gathered

Healthy Forests Aid Fire Prevention

When he's not helping people improve their health, Sam Palmer works to improve the health of woodlands near his home.

Sam has partnered with brothers Tad and Tom Houpt to clear forest debris on private property around John Day that otherwise could fuel deadly wildland fires.

The trio own Great Northern Resources. The company clears dead and dying trees and understory for landowners. It also does custom logging for local sawmills and sells firewood.

The business was born from an effort by Sam and the Houpts in 1998 to clean up their own woodlands. They began selling the material as firewood, expanding local sales to surrounding states.

Great Northern Resources has developed a new product from the enterprise. Its packaged firewood is available at convenience stores and outdoor events.

Sam is researching a potential firewood sale to government entities for use by campers in Arizona. The company also will offer a firewood product



Sam Palmer with some of the product destined to become Great Northern Resources firewood.

that contains "pitch" firewood starter for quick and easy starting without kindling or newspaper.

"Our forest health directly affects the community," Sam says. "This is just our little cause: to clean up the fire fuels on private lands, focus on the Healthy Forest Initiative and make firewood available to folks who need it." ■

For more information about Great Northern Resources, contact Sam Palmer at oregoncampfire@yahoo.com.

insight and information from EMS technicians, doctors, nurses and others he encountered. Sam decided nursing offered the opportunity to help, plus the variety of excitement that could hold his interest and challenge him.

He gained his fundamental medical education and practical training at St. Alphonsus Hospital in Boise, Idaho, but his real development and discipline comes from working with patients and other health-care professionals on real medical issues in the field.

Sam spent time in Las Vegas honing his skills in an urban setting.

But Harney County has been the proving ground of his medical career, he says.

"It's the frontier medicine in this rural area that brings the utmost challenge—more medical challenge than I've ever experienced," Sam says.

"When the ER (emergency room) in an urban setting gets a patient—let's say, with a gunshot wound—that patient gets diagnosed, receives a few medical tests and then they go to the operating room," Sam says. "In our rural area, they aren't any less shot or injured, but as an ER nurse here, it is more of a challenge

because you're responsible much longer to keep that person stable until you can access the proper treatment. Yes, we have a (general) surgery department now, but there are still some things that can't be done here. It may be determined that the ER team has to keep the patient alive and prepare them for transport to another facility.

"In urban settings, the people you treat, you've usually never seen before and probably never will see again."

Harney District Hospital patients visit the ER for a variety of health issues that might be the result of an icy-road auto accident, a hunting injury, a difficult birth, cardiac arrest, barbed wire entanglement, rattlesnake bite, being gored by a bull, being thrown down a ravine from horseback, toxic ingestion, broken bones or flulike symptoms.

Added to the challenge is the possibility that the ER nurse on duty could end up treating family members, friends, neighbors or adversaries. That psychological challenge can be a heavy burden, but Sam has a reputation for maintaining an even keel with the toughest cases.

Patients benefit from the compassionate way Sam communicates with those who visit the ER. His tone is professional and reassuring, no matter how many times he treats the same patient or the same complaint.

Sam says his biggest reward in medicine came several years ago while working in Hermiston.

It was Christmas Eve, and he had to defibrillate the heart of a patient, which reversed the man's cardiac arrest.

"As a rural frontier nurse, you don't know everything about your specialty, but you know a little about a variety of medical issues and how to find answers to critical questions," Sam says. "You have to be flexible. You might finish up a motorcycle accident with multiple injuries, then step across to the other side of the hospital floor to help with a difficult birth." ■