

Barbara Berner
Interview
AANP Oral History Project

Interview Barbara Berner (Past President of AANP)

Interviewer: Barbara Sheer via email

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Education:

Barbara Berner received her bachelor's degree from St. Anselm College in 1967, her master's degree in nursing as an adult nurse practitioner from Oregon Health and Science University in 1983, a post-master's certificate as a family nurse practitioner from the George Washington University in 1999, and her doctorate in Adult Education, Policy and Program Planning from Boston University in 1984.

Certifications: Adult Nurse Practitioner; AANP, and ANCC Certified. Family nurse Practitioner, ANCC certified.



Bio:

Dr. Berner has had a long career in nursing spanning over 50 years. She began her NP career as the training coordinator of the Alaska Community Health Aide Program in Anchorage, AK. She served the State of Alaska, Section of Epidemiology, as Coordinator of the Breast and Cervical Early Detection Program.

She commenced her teaching career at University of Alaska Anchorage in 1998 where she became coordinator of the Family Nurse Practitioner Program, a position she held for ten years. She then accepted a position as Project Director to develop the Doctor of Nursing Practice at the School of Nursing. That program was the first in the State of Alaska to offer a doctoral level program in Nursing. She became Interim Director for the School of Nursing until September of 2011 when she accepted the position as Director of the School of Nursing, which she held until her retirement in 2017.

Dr. Berner maintained her professional career as a practicing nurse practitioner over her entire career, including volunteering as a provider with the Municipality of Anchorage Women's Health Clinic for over 14 years. She has served in many leadership roles. She is past president of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, served two terms as president of the Alaska Nurse Practitioner Association, chaired the Professional Practices Committee for the Alaska Nurses Association and chaired the Legislative Committee for the Alaska Nurse Practitioner Association. In addition, she served on the Alaska State Board of Nursing for five years and chaired the Board for two years.

She has received numerous awards. She received the alumni award of excellence from St Anselm College in 1992. She was Alaska Nurse Practitioner of the Year 2000, a statewide award presented by the Alaska Nurse Practitioner Association. She also received a national award from the National Organization of Nurse Practitioner Faculty as Outstanding Nurse Practitioner Educator of the Year, 2008. In addition, she received the 2010 Nurse Practitioner Advocate Award from the Alaska Nurse Practitioner Association. She became a Fellow of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners in 2005.

Dr. Berner has had many publications and presentations. She did original national research on clinical competence in distance delivered nurse practitioner programs. She spearheaded statewide research that provided the first data on nurse practitioner practice trends in Alaska. That data was updated biennially beginning in 2011 and served to identify and quantify the role and impact of nurse practitioners in primary care in Alaska.

When did you become and NP? What was the motivation?

I became an NP in 1983. Our family moved to Alaska in 1974 which was my first exposure to NPs. Two NPs with whom I associated were situated in remote communities of Alaska. In speaking with them about their work, their ability to provide high quality care in these remote settings intrigued me. As I spoke to them more about their work, I decided that if the opportunity arose, I would attempt to become an NP. That opportunity did come to fruition and I completed my first NP program as an adult NP in 1983. I wanted to enlarge my scope of practice to Family and was able to add that credential in 1999.

What experiences did you bring to the role?

My first experiences as a nurse were varied and included nursing in a 24 bed rural hospital, charge nurse in a newborn and premature nursery, and head nurse in a step-down unit at a county hospital. All these experiences taught me how to develop therapeutic communication and respect for my patients, no matter what their background. The variety of different experiences was invaluable to the development of my professional career. I learned that I could cope in many settings with many different people.

Did you experience any challenges? How were they resolved?

When I began my practice in Alaska in 1983, our state had just begun independent practice for NPs. We were one of the first three states to have this designation and we received a great deal of pushback from other medical professionals. In fact, at one of the major hospitals in Anchorage, we were not allowed to order mammograms. We had to fight for every benefit of independent practice including ordering and having our patients be covered by insurance for pharmaceuticals.

The way many of the impediments to our full and independent practice were resolved was for us to have a strong, unified and united approach to our goals and to persist until those goals were accomplished. Those goals required all of us in the NP community to work closely together even though our numbers at that time were small. We were very successful in overcoming many barriers even though some of those barriers took more than one attempt.

Are there any experiences that you would like to talk about?

There have been a number of experiences that have shaped my role in my profession. One of the most satisfying has been my ability to be able to pass on my role to new NP students. I have had the honor of being able to teach in the NP program at the University of Alaska Anchorage for 18 years. My work with these wonderful and motivated students has been incredibly satisfying and enriching and I would recommend that all NPs have at least some of that experience by teaching, giving guest lectures, and, especially, precepting students. The rewards are many and I have developed life-long relationships with many of my past students. It is particularly rewarding to see my past students excel in their roles and take our profession to new levels.

What was most challenging in your career/most important?

My greatest challenge and likely, most important, was in the development of the DNP at the University of Alaska Anchorage. There had never been a doctoral program or degree completed exclusively on this campus. There was a great deal of negativity toward any doctoral programs on this campus specifically

from another university campus that had traditionally given out the only doctorates within our university system.

I had to work with many segments of our campus administration and statewide university system to receive approval to develop and implement the program. In addition, there were some other nursing faculty and nurses in the community who were opposed to development of the DNP. I had to hone my diplomacy skills and work with a many nursing faculty and community supporters to organize a vision that had a strong rational component to make the case for the importance of this program. It took a total of eight years the get this program implemented. We received full initial accreditation and had our first graduating class in 2017.

Is there anything you want to change?

Struggles can help us to grow. There is deep satisfaction in overcoming hard fought battles. There is nothing I would change for me in my over 34 years as an NP. My only wish is that more states will change laws to allow NPs to develop full practice authority.

What do you see as pivotal moments in the past years?

One of the most pivotal moments in the past years has been the recognition of legislators that the NP profession has great promise for providing cost effective, high quality care. The number of research outcomes of comparisons to other primary providers has helped to clarify this fact. The change in the number of physicians who specialize in primary care emphasizes this point. Having our legislators support us has helped us to move in the direction of achieving our goals to be able to practice at the highest level of our education. Our continuing work with legislators is vital.

What advice would you give to new nurse practitioners?

Work together in a collegial relationship with all health care providers. Each can learn from the others and all have perspectives to offer that are invaluable.

Get involved with both your state and national NP organizations. There is power in numbers and you can learn so much from each other.

Visit your legislators and provide your prospective to improving health care in your communities.

Precept NP students as soon as you feel comfortable.

What do you see as the role of Nurse Practitioners in the next 25 years?

Nurse Practitioners will be the major primary care practitioners in health care of the future. Our philosophy of holistic care will be the dominant philosophy and will permeate other professions as a preferred model for quality care.