

## The Anchor Of Health And Well-Being

An Interview with Laura J. Wood, DNP, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN

Executive Vice President, Patient Care Operations and System Chief Nursing Executive, Boston Children's Hospital

**EDITORS' NOTE** Laura Wood is one of nursing's leading healthcare executives, advancing the health and well-being of children and team members as Boston Children's Hospital's Executive Vice President for Patient Care Operations and System Chief Nurse Executive, and the Sporing Carpenter Chair for Nursing. As the senior nurse and a patient care leader dedicated to advancing child health via clinical care, research, innovation, education, and community engagement throughout the organization's



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system of care, Wood brings a direct understanding of leader priorities in service to the organization and in alignment with the largest segment of the health-care workforce – registered nurses and advanced practice registered nurses. Since joining Boston Children's in 2013, Wood has co-led the implementation of a High Reliability Organization program with Boston Children's President and CEO, Kevin B. Churchwell, MD, achieving a 50 percent reduction in preventable harm. She has brought a clear commitment to operational excellence, digital health innovation, and healthy work environments, consistent with priorities set during her 16-year tenure at Siemens Healthcare (now Oracle Cerner Corporation) where she served as Vice President, National Clinical Solutions and contributed to the effective adoption of health-care IT. Earlier in her career, Wood held pediatric nursing and operational leadership roles at three leading academic health systems: The Johns Hopkins Hospital Children's Center (Hopkins Medicine), The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), and The University of Pennsylvania Health System (PennMedicine). An advocate for child well-being fostered through equity, diversity, and inclusivity as a foundation to nurture the health of individuals and communities, Wood previously served as a volunteer and subsequently as an officer of the Germantown Friends School, a Philadelphia-based Quaker independent school with an emphasis on community building that reflects the diversity in the world. Within Boston Children's, she contributed to a multi-year effort culminating in the creation of Boston Children's Office of Health Equity in 2016. Throughout her tenure at Boston Children's, Wood has led focused efforts to attract and retain a diverse nursing workforce resulting in a doubling of the number of racially and ethnically diverse RN team members now serving the organization's increasingly broad patient and family population. Wood

earned her undergraduate degree from West Virginia University, magna cum laude, completed graduate preparation at the University of Maryland, Baltimore in maternal-child nursing as a pediatric oncology clinical nurse specialist, and completed a National Institute of Health-funded Adolescent Health training fellowship within NIH's Clinical Center, Pediatric Oncology Branch. Wood graduated from the Johns Hopkins University Doctor of Nursing Practice program and is a recipient of the school's Fralic Nurse Leader Fellowship and Dean's

Award. She is a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Executive Nurse Fellow Alumna and an elected Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing. Wood currently serves as President, American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC), a subsidiary of the American Nurses Association (ANA), providing governance as Board Chair in support of the organization's focused certification, accreditation, and recognition initiatives, including the Magnet Recognition and Pathway to Excellence Programs. In addition to her ANCC board service, she also serves on the following boards and advisory groups: American Academy of Nursing (AAN) – Fellow Selection Committee; Boston Children's Hospital (ex officio); Controlled Risk Insurance Company; Friends of the National Institute of Nursing Research; Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce Women's Network Advisory Board; Greater Boston Nursing Collective; Pediatric Physician Organization of Boston Children's; Simmons University; and The Joint Commission Chief Nursing Executive Advisory Committee.

**INSTITUTION BRIEF** Boston Children's Hospital ([childrenshospital.org](http://childrenshospital.org)) is dedicated to improving and advancing the health and well-being of children around the world through its life-changing work in clinical care, biomedical research, medical education, and community engagement. Ranked among the best hospitals in the nation by U.S. News and World Report and Newsweek, it is the largest recipient of NIH funding for pediatric medical research and is the primary pediatric teaching hospital for Harvard Medical School. Boston Children's treats more children with rare diseases and complex conditions than any other hospital. For more than 150 years, Boston Children's Hospital has maintained the same vision: to advance pediatric care worldwide. The hospital's nursing and patient care excellence is reflected through numerous

external bodies, including four American Nurses Credentialing Center Magnet® designations and numerous specialty-specific nursing awards.

**Will you highlight Boston Children's history as a distinguished leader in both pediatric clinical research (curing) and family and child-centered models (caring)?**

Curing: Clinical Research and Science-enabled Therapies – From its founding in 1869, Boston Children's has always looked to the future. The organization has long demonstrated a commitment to discoveries and innovations that transform pediatric healthcare through rigorous research and scientific breakthroughs to save lives and improve health outcomes. Key examples include:

- culturing the polio virus, leading to the polio vaccine and earning the Nobel Prize
- performing the first surgery to correct a congenital heart defect in a child, launching the field of pediatric heart surgery
- developing the first effective treatment for childhood leukemia, establishing chemotherapy as a mainstay of pediatric cancer treatment
- developing the measles vaccine, earning another Nobel Prize

Our history of research and therapeutic breakthroughs continues to drive us. Today's research and science are already foreshadowing how the next decade will be transformative in relationship to our ability to cure diseases once thought to be incurable, like sickle cell disease. We will also continue to advance our treatment of rare diseases and complex conditions, which affect more than 350 million individuals globally, more than 50 percent of whom are children.

Over the past six years, Boston Children's has created a nurse-led, emerging therapies operational model to enable access and early adoption of gene therapies. Today, the hospital is the only children's hospital in the U.S. to treat children with all seven of the currently available gene and novel therapies.

Caring: Nurse-enabled Family and Child-Centered Care – For the hospital's first 70 years, a series of "nurse superintendents" oversaw hospital operations in alignment with physician leaders. Today, Boston Children's has advanced a model that supports nurse executive contributions in all key decision-making settings including the hospital board and supports direct-care nurses as essential leaders through a professional governance model. More than a half century ago, the hospital was also one of the first to eliminate parent visitation hours, in favor of "rooming in" at the bedside of



Laura Wood with Boston Children's CEO, Dr. Kevin B. Churchwell

their hospitalized child, promote parent presence during procedures, and establish a Patient Family Advisory Council to incorporate the perspectives and priorities of children, adolescents, and families more formally throughout the hospital's care model.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Boston Children's immediately set aside existing protocols and pioneered ways to maintain the essential nature of family caregiving, allowing parents to continue full participation at the bedside. At Boston Children's, cures and scientific discoveries go hand-in-hand with human caring.

**How do you define Boston Children's culture and values?**

Our culture is one that strives to achieve scientific and care delivery innovation and is guided by a strong focus on our mission:

- Provide cutting edge, innovative care
- Be a leader in pediatric research and discovery
- Educate tomorrow's leaders in child health
- Improve the health and well-being of children in our local communities

Our culture and shared values are reflected through a framework known as "The Boston Children's Way"—holding ourselves to the highest values of respect, inclusivity, diversity, teamwork, and kindness to provide patients, families, and each other with an experience equal to the care we deliver. Our values are further translated through five High Reliability Organization principles: preoccupation with failure; reluctance to simplify; sensitivity to operations; deference to expertise; and commitment to excellence. Our culture seeks to support continuous learning and improvement, applying practices related to psychological safety within our teamwork.

**What role do you envision Boston Children's playing in demonstrating strategies to attract and retain nurses?**

Long before the onset of COVID-19, Boston Children's Hospital and its senior nursing and operational leaders understood the importance of the health of clinical work environments. Through

the adoption of a Healthy Work Environment survey tool over the past 15 years, coupled with the application of evidence-based standards to support frontline teams, we have maintained a low average RN annual nursing turnover rate of 5-6 percent for more than a decade, well below national averages.

Boston Children's also continues to evolve clinical team and leadership structures to strengthen decision-making and teamwork at the point of care. An important 2023 study conducted by the American Organization of Nurse Leaders confirmed "connection is retention." The study report, "Lessons from Leaders with Unusually High Nurse Retention" noted that RNs who worked for local leaders who offered care, growth and help were 80 percent more likely to continue their commitment to the organization and to nursing. Boston Children's is committed to the empowerment of frontline nurse leaders, supporting their daily management practices to determine nursing and team resource needs. Effective nurse staffing resource allocation is critical to delivering high quality care and supporting healthy work environments. A competitive total rewards compensation and benefits model is foundational, as are professional development, learning, and career advancement opportunities. The hospital has long invested heavily in nursing professional development, professional advancement, specialty certification, tuition remission including loan forgiveness, a defined contribution pension plan, and the creation of multi-year learning opportunities via nurse scientist-led continuing education programs such as the hospital's evidence-based practice and nursing science fellowships to elevate career development and advancement as a key retention strategy.

Attention to the safety and well-being of nurses is another key focus Boston Children's has prioritized through the creation of a visitor code of conduct, implementation of staff duress buttons on ID badges, and formal trauma-informed de-escalation and communications preparation coupled with after-care programs when staff injuries occur.

**How do you describe your core leadership practices and philosophy, and to what extent did these change during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

I have long valued relationship-centric leadership and gravitated toward in-person collaboration. This proved extremely important in the first years of the pandemic when team members were understandably frightened for their personal safety and simultaneously impacted by so many life and family strains. I intentionally maintained an in-person presence throughout the pandemic together with other clinical leaders. While I strongly support the evolution of new hybrid work environments, it is critical that those who lead clinical teams providing direct care maintain a consistent presence and be available as unforeseen challenges arise. It is key to balance a relationship-focused leadership orientation with a results orientation, aiming to solve problems effectively through shared ownership of complex challenges and support of others.

I have long sought to exemplify the principle, "My job is to make good things happen for other people." I try to ask colleagues how I can help them accomplish key priorities or solve vexing challenges.

**How has your service as a board member and volunteer contributed to your own professional development and to the improvement of health and healthcare?**

Community board service has been a meaningful way for me to contribute in some small measure to organizations where my personal and professional values strongly align. I am frequently asked why I elect to extend myself to serve as a volunteer given the significant demands related to my primary personal and professional roles. Board service has expanded my network of peers and leaders within my immediate community as well as nationally and internationally and supported my learning. Of note, only modest progress has been realized over the past several decades to appoint nurses to healthcare and industry boards. Despite nurses having substantial, direct knowledge of healthcare operations, there remains more to do to prepare nurses for board service and to convince healthcare organizations to appoint nurses to their boards.

Boston Children's stands out for its commitment to ensuring nurses' voices are heard. I serve on Boston Children's Board of Trustees as an ex officio member, and on numerous board subcommittees including finance, audit and compliance, and the quality and safety board.

**What system-level changes are most needed to evolve a more sustainable model of health and well-being for children and families?**

The phrase, "The world needs nurses" has never been truer. Shortages of nurses seeking to work in healthcare have increased following the pandemic. The pandemic illuminated the vital role nurses play in direct care, leadership, and in the much-needed evolution of work environments to strengthen staffing practices and create new technology-enabled care delivery models. System-level changes are needed to stabilize and expand the overall nursing workforce. In many ways, nurses are the anchor of health and well-being not only for the children and families, but for societies everywhere. ●