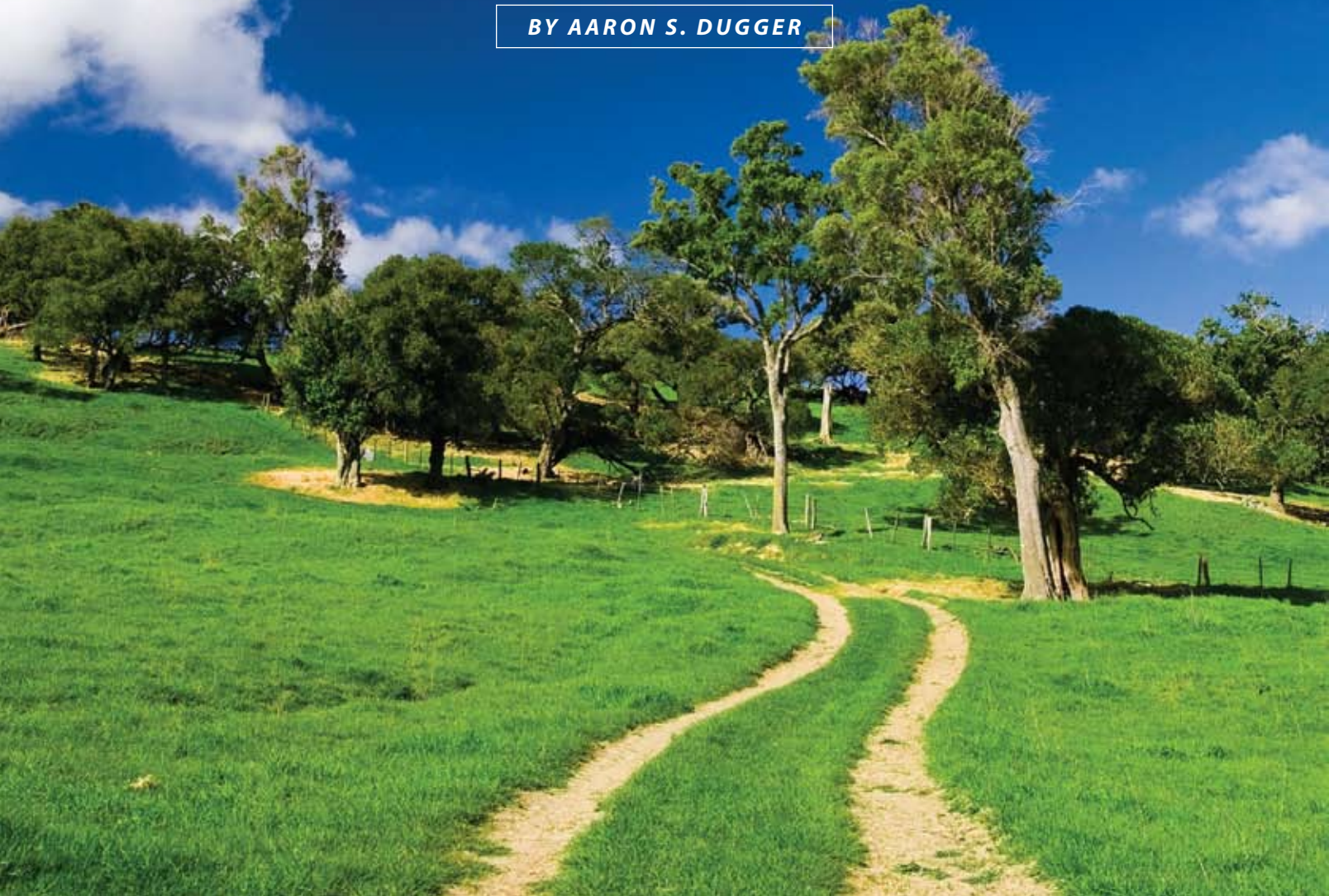


IMPROVING RURAL HEALTHCARE: A LIFELONG MISSION

BY AARON S. DUGGER



LIMITED ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE IS A PROBLEM IN MANY OF KENTUCKY'S RURAL AREAS. LACK OF EMPHASIS ON PREVENTIVE CARE FURTHER COMPLICATES THE SITUATION. WKU SCHOOL OF NURSING PROFESSOR SUSAN JONES IS WORKING DILIGENTLY TO IMPROVE THESE CONDITIONS.

As a member of the university's faculty for nearly four decades, Dr. Jones's long list of collaborative research activities, community service projects, publications, and awards is extraordinary. More remarkable, however, is her steadfast commitment to improving the health of rural residents and promoting safety among agricultural workers.

After growing up in rural Macon County, Tennessee, Jones earned her bachelor's degree in nursing from the University of Tennessee at Memphis. She first worked as a staff nurse and eventually as head nurse at Vanderbilt University Hospital. "I was not one of those people who always wanted to be a nurse. Sometime in the early 1960s, however, I became very interested in the medical field through reading and working as an aide in a local hospital. I found it very rewarding to use art, science, and self in the service of others," Jones explains. In the fall of 1970, she began her career at WKU as an assistant instructor of surgical nursing and returned to Vanderbilt University to complete her master's degree the following year. Over the next two decades she also spent several summers working as a staff nurse at The Medical Center in Bowling Green. Additionally, Dr. Jones served as a Hospice nurse volunteer from 1982 until 1990. In 2004, she earned a Ph.D. in Nursing Research at the University of Cincinnati, an institution with which she continues to collaborate regularly.

"During the past fifteen years my primary research focus has been



Susan Jones

in the area of agricultural health and safety," says Jones. "We know that agriculture alternates with mining and construction as being the most dangerous occupation. If you work in the emergency room or critical care, you quickly realize that agricultural workers are engaged in dangerous work. Coming from

a family of farmers, I wanted to help change this statistic, to reduce injuries and illnesses." From 1992 until 1996, Dr. Jones coordinated the implementation of a W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant project designed to empower rural women to reduce agricultural injuries and illnesses on their farms. An outcome of this activity was the creation of a non-profit organization, the Kentucky Partnership for Farm Family Health and Safety, Inc. Jones continues to serve as the liaison between this organization and the nursing faculty and students at WKU.

Her ongoing collaboration with the Partnership has opened the door to students wishing to participate in health promotion programs for rural residents. "Students have been involved in such activities as agricultural safety days, health promotion projects at country stores,

"If you work in the emergency room or critical care, you quickly realize that agricultural workers are engaged in dangerous work. Coming from a family of farmers, I wanted to help change this statistic, to reduce injuries and illnesses."





and specific community outreach activities with targeted populations such as old order Mennonites and migrant workers,” Jones reports. These activities resulted in the creation of an interdisciplinary (agriculture, public health, and nursing) university course dedicated to addressing the various dimensions of rural health care.

In the teaching arena, Jones serves as Coordinator of the RN to BSN program. “Using methods of distance education, this entire nursing curriculum is televised or taught by web, making the program accessible to many place-bound, working, rural nurses. Some counties had limited nurses prepared at the bachelor’s level until this program was made available,” explains Jones. She describes this as her proudest accomplishment, adding, “I think it has the largest potential to impact and influence the health of rural people.”

Between 1998 and 2005, Dr. Jones’s research continued unabated as she participated in multiple projects. During that time she worked to earn the trust of an Old Order Mennonite community in Allen County. “An outcome of this

“Using methods of distance education, this entire nursing curriculum is televised or taught by web, making the program accessible to many place-bound, working, rural nurses.”

relationship was the organization of a monthly health clinic for its members,” Jones points out. “This interdisciplinary project continues to provide learning opportunities in cultural awareness and competency for WKU nursing students and faculty, as well as medical residents from the University of Louisville. At the same time, it provides health promotion services for members of this rural community.”

In 2001, Jones served as the primary investigator for the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health’s (NIOSH) Pilot Research Project Training Program. Jones conducted focus group interviews with employees of industrial swine operations to identify the factors which necessitate the use of respiratory protection on the job. This endeavor eventually formed the basis for her 2004 doctoral dissertation, *Predicting the Use of Personal Respiratory Protection among Workers in Swine Confinement Buildings*. During that same year, she worked as a co-investigator on another NIOSH program designed to reduce the risk of hearing loss in farmers. The project evaluated the effectiveness of an intervention designed to increase the





use of hearing protection by farmers in two south central Kentucky counties.

Improving the quality of life for elderly individuals is another example of Dr. Jones's commitment to public service. As a recipient of a 2005 Summer Faculty Scholarship Award at WKU, she completed a unique project entitled *Empowering Elders in Residential Facilities through the Use of Technology*, in which elderly residents were taught to use computers as a means of keeping in touch with family and friends. Jones's fervid devotion to improving rural health conditions has continued throughout the second half of the decade, as demonstrated by her current projects.

Jones is presently engaged in an innovative research project with two colleagues from the WKU School of Nursing, Deborah Williams and Eve Main. Their goal is to study the use



of B&W Salve and leaf therapy by members of Mennonite and Amish communities. B&W is short for "burns and wounds," and the salve is an amalgam of natural ingredients such as honey, aloe vera gel, white oak bark, and marshmallow root. The salve is used in combination with certain leaves, such as those of the burdock tree, to treat burns and other conditions.

"The Amish and Mennonite communities desire to use this treatment when their members are admitted to the hospital," Jones explains. Though some might dismiss it as a mere folk remedy, the trio of researchers is not attempting to supplant the practice with modern medical treatments. After collecting completed questionnaires from individuals who have used this form of treatment, they will analyze the data and present their findings to the broader medical community. "Our goal is to get an article published in the medical journals so healthcare providers will have some information when they are confronted with this request," says Jones. "The article will be designed to inform health care providers of the qualitative value of this culturally-related treatment practice." Interestingly, the project is international in scope. "Data will be

collected from members of Amish and Mennonite communities across the United States, Central America, and Canada.”

Dr. Jones is also working with Professor Tiina Reponen of the University of Cincinnati’s Department of Environmental Health. Their goal is to determine the workplace protection measures currently used by agricultural workers against biological particles and bioaerosols. “My role is to assist in the recruitment of farmers to participate in the study, gain their consent, and conduct the online medical clearance for each subject. Thus far, we have used grain farms, cattle, horse, and swine barns, and feed mills for data collection. We hope the study will provide generalizable information to refine the guidelines for respirator use and to design more efficient respirators for agricultural workers.”

Jones’s successful mission to improve the health of rural Kentuckians is largely achieved through her talent for writing grant proposals. In 2003, she was inducted into WKU’s Million Dollar Club in recognition of dollars generated through external grant awards. In 2005 alone, Jones submitted three proposals totaling over \$650,000. “In all grant proposals I attempt to involve junior faculty members and students.” Such collaboration, however, is not confined to WKU. She is currently working with colleagues at the University of Kentucky to submit yet another grant proposal. Their goal is to assess the effectiveness of an intervention aimed at controlling childhood asthma in rural farm areas. “The long-term objective of this randomized, controlled clinical trial is to improve pediatric

asthma outcomes by enhancing adherence to recommended asthma self-management,” Jones explains. “Seven through eleven year-olds with persistent asthma and their parents or guardians will be recruited from physicians’ practices in central, western, and eastern Kentucky. My role will be accessing farm children who are willing to participate,” she concludes.

While Dr. Jones collaborates regularly with her peers, her commitment to student engagement is evident. “Whatever I’m doing professionally,” she states, “I believe I have a responsibility to get students involved. For example, it is important to encourage and assist students to participate in the process of disseminating scholarly work. Also, I think learning occurs best when they participate in hands-on activities. Serving others and experiencing the difference one can make in the lives of others reinforces this learning. Getting students involved in research instills in them a quest for knowledge and a commitment to lifelong learning.”

Jones also believes that current students, alumni, and Kentuckians in general can work together to improve rural healthcare conditions across the Commonwealth. “We must learn to collaborate and form partnerships to assist rural residents in solving their own problems. I think people can be empowered to find their own solutions. In fact, most sustainable change begins at the grassroots level.”

When asked about her future research goals, Dr. Jones responds cheerfully and without hesitation. “I anticipate continuing in the same direction, even after retirement. After all, isn’t ‘retirement’ doing what one wishes to do?” ■

“We must learn to collaborate and form partnerships to assist rural residents in solving their own problems. I think people can be empowered to find their own solutions. In fact, most sustainable change begins at the grassroots level.”

