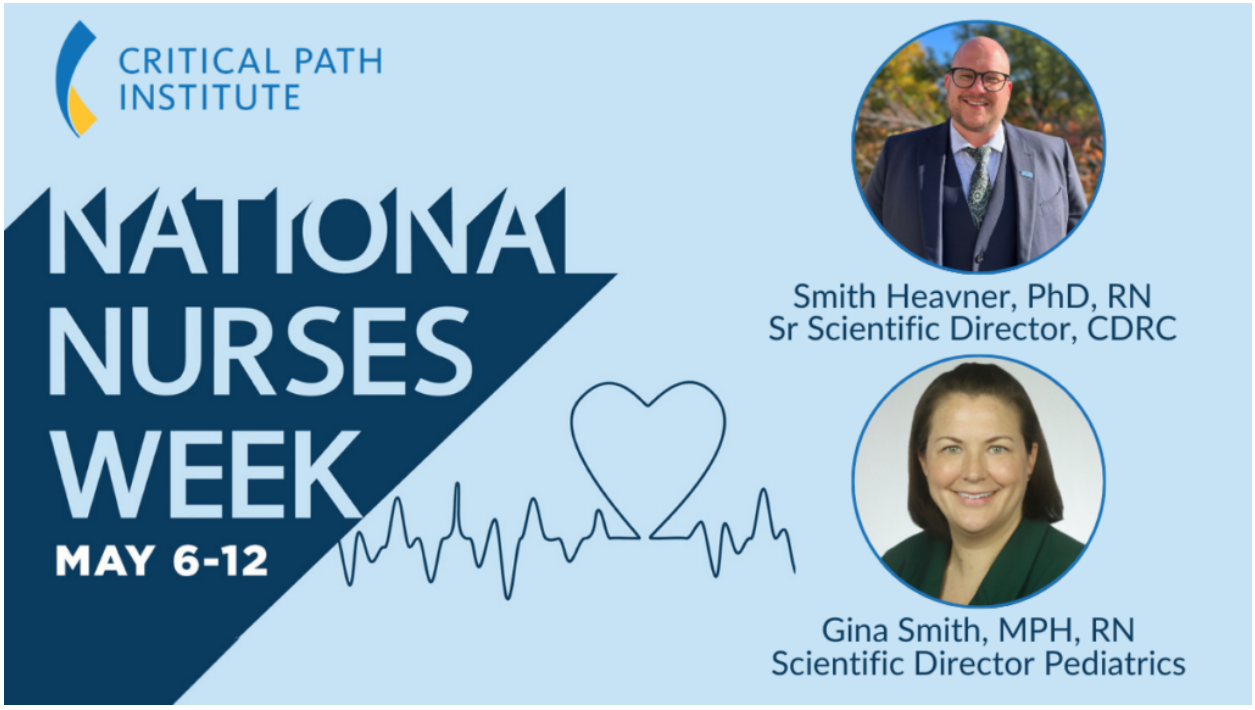
Beyond the Scrubs: C-Path Nurses Smith, Heavner Share Their Insights for Nurses Week



In honor of National Nurses Week, C-Path sat down with its own Gina Smith, MPH, RN, and Smith Heavner, Ph.D., RN, to gain valuable insights from their experience as nurses. In this lively, question-and-answer style roundtable, you'll gain perspectives on why each decided to become a nurse, how their respective backgrounds led them to success at C-Path, advice for those going into nursing, and more. Read along below:

What inspired you to become a nurse?

Gina Smith (GS): After my freshman year of college, I was a little lost and uncertain of my career path. I volunteered at the local children's hospital taking the 'activity cart' to each room for kids to pick crafts and other activities to bide their time during their stay. I felt a calling to be a part of their everyday health journey and immediately changed my major to nursing.

Smith Heavner (SH): After graduating high school, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. I liked the idea of nursing and the ability to pursue my love of science and teaching. To dip my feet into the profession, I took a job at the local nursing home as a patient care technician. I found caring for my patients incredibly affirming, and I enrolled in the nursing program at a community college.

What do you find most rewarding about being a nurse?

GS: The most rewarding times are when I make a connection with a patient or family that softens or brightens their day. Now that I'm outside of the hospital focused on rare disease research, I still find it most rewarding to connect with the patients and families and to see the hope the work I do brings to their life.

SH: There are a lot of incredible things I've been a part of in the emergency department and more than a few horrible ones. While it is amazing to be part of handling severe illnesses and injuries, I have always found the small moments of humanity to be the most rewarding. While taking a few minutes to help a patient get comfortable or clean them up before their family comes back in, there is this incredible sense of connection with the human in front of me. This experience is different in my current role, but I take every opportunity I can to make those connections by creating space for patients to share their perspective and amplify their voices.

How does your nursing background help you succeed in your current career at C-path?

GS: My nursing career has taken many pathways from early days as a certified nurses' assistant in an Alzheimer's unit, bedside in a neonatal intensive care unit, managing infectious diseases research at a large children's hospital, to navigating the complexities of neonatal and pediatric rare disease clinical trial work. All of this lends to a diverse skillset and the ability to

know ‘my normal,’ assess, and advocate when I see issues or solutions to bring the patient back to ‘their normal.’ Starting with the basics and what we know can help define the pathway for questions yet to be answered.

SH: Nursing is distinct from medicine in a few ways, but I think the most important is the focus on holistic wellness. Traditional medical education focuses on curing and managing disease (this is shifting), but nursing prioritizes maximizing the health of the patient in their current state. This means I can often bring a different perspective of how to define and measure outcomes.

Can you share a memorable patient experience that has stayed with you?

GS: Early on as a neonatal nurse I assisted a family in learning how to care for their child with epidermolysis bullosa, a rare disorder that causes the skin, mucosa to blister and peel – a very painful condition prone to infection. The mom had a healthy pregnancy, uneventful delivery, and the family expected a healthy baby to bring home. Assisting and then observing the mother and father learn how to adapt and care for their infant was heartbreaking and inspiring. It sticks with me due to the immense love and support they immediately showed for their child and each other, despite the overwhelming grief that came with the diagnosis. It has been an ongoing motivation for the work I do in rare diseases and pediatric research.

SH: In critical care, we often use medications off-label. For patients with anaphylaxis, a severe allergic reaction, we administer epinephrine and diphenhydramine, both labeled as short-acting agents for severe allergic reactions. We also give famotidine, a drug labeled for treatment of reflux, because it is a histamine-2 antagonist and has a longer half-life that diphenhydramine (a histamine-1 antagonist). This additional off-label treatment helps keep the patient’s symptoms from returning abruptly. I remember administering this combination of medications to a young girl stung by a bee. She and her parents were terrified, because her throat was swelling up again even though they administered her Epipen before coming to the hospital. I kept a picture she drew of me in my locker for years so that, even with all the horrible things I saw in the emergency department each day, I would have this reminder of how important it was to learn everything I could to help my patients.

What advice would you give to aspiring nurses just starting their journey?

GS: Know your normal. Everything starts by knowing the ‘normal’ state of the body and finding your voice when you see it deviate. Sometimes this means knowing your patient’s baseline or, in my current work, it’s knowing the pathways, context, and precedence towards regulatory endorsement or approval.

SH: Build a support system. Nursing is deeply emotional labor, and you will need help from colleagues, peers, friends, and family. These relationships are the best protection against burnout to make sure you can keep going wherever your career takes you.

Can you share a moment when you felt particularly proud of your nursing profession?

GS: During the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic I felt such pride, awe, and empathy for the many nurses who were frontline workers. They spent countless hours caring for so many patients, sometimes in less-than-optimal conditions. Nurses are the heart, soul and foundation of good medicine.

Heavner working at a COVID-19 mass vaccination site in Greenville, SC.

SH: In 2016, I was working night shift in a South Carolina emergency department when the news broke about the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Fla. Everyone's cellphones started ringing at the same time as we received updates through our networks of professional organizations, colleagues, and classmates. Despite the panic and anxiety, nurses across the country started organizing. First, someone ordered pizzas to be delivered to the Orlando emergency departments, and by the time our shift ended, we had donated to help the nurses caring for the victims with childcare and housework. It was an incredible example of nurses coming together to support each other, and we saw this continue in other disasters and in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

How do you support and uplift your fellow nurses during Nurses Week and throughout the year?

GS: I am proud to be a nurse and the diverse pathway my career has taken. I have mentored many young adults considering a career in nursing and urge them forward as it is such a solid, good foundation of knowledge and experience that can take you in many different directions. I think the best way I support and uplift nurses is by sharing my journey and pride with others, never being shy to proclaim, "I'm a nurse!"

SH: My nursing experience informs each aspect of my work, and my career is built on that foundation of clinical knowledge. I owe my success to the countless nurses I worked with in clinical units and research settings who supported my learning and encouraged my curiosity. To pay forward what I received, I try to make space for other nurses to participate in research by mentoring younger nurse scientists and advocating for the importance of nursing perspectives.

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