

Nurse and Director of Innovation: Marion Leary, PhD, MPH, RN

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Lisa Bonsall: Hi, everybody. Welcome to our podcast. I'm here with Dr. Marion Leary, who is the Director of Innovation at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing. Dr. Leary has been involved in incredible initiatives to amplify the voice of nurses and share the innovative work that nurses are doing. Thank you, Dr. Leary, for joining me today.

Marion Leary: Thanks for having me. I'm really excited to have this conversation.

Lisa Bonsall: I am excited too to tell our audience all about the work you're doing and the difference you are making. First off, I want to ask you about your nursing journey. Can you describe what your path has been?

Marion Leary: Sure. My path has been, a little bit all over the place. I actually never really considered nursing as a profession that I would go into until probably my early 20s. At that time, I was working in a place for people who were HIV positive, had drug and alcohol addiction and mental health issues. And, I worked with this nurse who really changed my view on what nursing was and who nurses were and how they worked. And, it was because of that nurse that I really started to think about nursing as a profession that I would really be able to gravitate towards. And so, I went back to school for nursing and started focusing on research because I knew I wanted to do research as a nurse and, sort of my whole career took off.

I worked in the medical ICU for a very short period of time, but then, quickly started doing resuscitation science research. So working for an institution called the Center for Resuscitation Science at the University of Pennsylvania started off there as a clinical nurse research coordinator. And then just over, you know, or years worked my way up to having my own grants, my own research team, my own research questions. And really, that led me to where I am today because I started thinking about how we could create innovative solutions to the problems we were seeing in a variety of areas, not just resuscitation science.

Lisa Bonsall: Wow, you're such a great example of the many things that nurses could do. People don't typically expect that.

Marion Leary: Yeah, and that's not even like... I gave you the short version. That path was not as straight as it sounds. I had a lot of starts and stops, in terms of my education, I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up. You know, I went to a variety of different schools for a variety of different programs, and none of

them seemed like a fit. And even once I got into nursing, you know, I worked at the bedside for a short period of time. I knew I wanted to do research, and I was with the research group for a while, but I also taught and did a variety of other things. And then, you know, stumbling into innovation just opened up a whole new world for me and a profession that most people at the time, and still, I would argue, some don't see them together.

Lisa Bonsall: Right. Well, that's a perfect segue into my next question. What is nurse innovation and why do nurses need to be innovative and then share those innovations?

Marion Leary: You know, so I think about innovation and not just specifically for nursing but health care in general, but nurses, as leaders in the health and health care innovation space, as really a mindset. And, you know, my view on this has changed over the years from trying to help nurses learn about how to create the innovative solutions that they come up with to the problems they're trying to solve, whether that's technologies or widgets or processes or, you know, educational solutions. For me, I'm really solution agnostic. It's really about how do you train and educate nurses to think more innovatively about the problems are trying to solve. And then of course, the solutions to solve the problems.

But really that mindset shift around looking at all the different things we do in health care, from a human-centered design, equity-centered design, lens. And I can go into what those mean if you want, like that's really where my focus and shift has been when talking about nurse-led innovation is really the way that we're teaching and training our nurses to think about problems, because, you know, we have a plethora of problems that haven't gone away in decades and decades and decades. And so clearly, we need to start thinking differently about them.

Lisa Bonsall: Right. Because I think we're really good at problem solving, but not so much as like putting it into action so that everybody can, you know, use these solutions or, you know, work toward it Being a bigger project. It's kind of like, what can I... how can I problem solve to get through my day? But maybe not looking bigger picture.

Marion Leary: Yeah. And you make a good point. Nurses are consummate innovators, consummate problem solvers. You know, the nursing process and the innovation, human-centered design process, they mirror each other really nicely. You know, the nursing process. You know, we're going to assess a patient. We're going to, you know, figure out what the problem is. We're going to try and solve that problem. We're going to test it, and we're going to assess to see if what we came up with worked. Well, that's the human-centered design process of empathy, define, ideate, prototype and test. You're doing the same exact thing through both of those processes. We just call them different words, different terms. But I mean, I think that for me, that's why nurses are so good at learning how to innovate and how to take an idea and really make sure that it meets the needs of their end users.

Lisa Bonsall: Well, as a nurse myself in the Philadelphia area, I can say that you are everywhere, and you're doing so much great work and I love to hear you speak and see what you're working on. You're an educator, you're an advocate for our profession, and you have a lot of projects going on...podcasts, story slams, fellowship programs... So can you talk to us about your current projects?

Marion Leary: Sure. Well, I will talk about the Johnson & Johnson Nurse Innovation Fellowship first, because I don't know when this podcast comes out. But today is April 9th and we just announced our fellows for the program. So we have senior nurse executive leaders. So chief nursing officers and senior nurse leaders from ten different institutions around the country who are going to spend a year working with us at Penn Nursing and the folks at Wharton to learn about everything we just sort of talked about. How to create that innovative mindset, how to use human-centered and equity-centered design to solve problems. And then with our partners at Wharton, to learn the leadership and business acumen skills specific to an innovative mindset. And so these nurse leaders will go through, like I said, a year-long program of both in-person and hybrid sessions where they're going to be working with their teams at their institutions to use the human-centered design process to solve a problem that they're experiencing and create a solution at their respective institutions. It's an incredible program. Cohort one is wrapping up, next month. I'm really, really sad to have it come to an end. The nurse leaders we've been working with over this whole year, I've learned so much from them. They've learned so much from us, and they're making such a huge difference back at their respective institutions working through this process and, you know, I give them all so much credit and so much props because it's a lot of work we're asking them to do for this fellowship. But, you know, we've already heard from a number of them how much of a change it has made in their mindset and the way that they're thinking about, you know, higher level problems at their institutions, but also specific problems at their institutions, which, again, as an educator and as I said at the beginning of this, I'm really thinking about innovation as a mindset shift. And we're seeing that happen over this fellowship with our first cohort of fellows. And I couldn't be happier about it.

Lisa Bonsall: Oh that's great. Strong work.

Marion Leary: So that's one project. Thank you. And, you know, we have so many projects going on. You know, we have our Penn Nursing Innovation Accelerator program, which just happened last week. In that program we provide funding, mentorship and, new this year, a spot in the Penn Pennovation Summer Accelerator program, where our winners will learn how to take their ideas that they've come up with for solution, and they'll work over six weeks in this accelerator program, to learn how to implement it, to make connections, and to really be able to move that idea forward. And so our Penn Nursing Innovation Accelerator program happens every year. And we always have, you know, or teams of either nursing faculty, or students who are going through this program, similar to the fellowship. You know, the whole point is for them to learn about the innovation and entrepreneurship skills that they need to take their ideas forward. And then even if the ideas that they're working on in the accelerator don't, you know, move on to where they want it to be, at least they will have learned how to do these things, which for me is really the most important point of the of all these programs is having more nurses learn about innovation, human-centered design and entrepreneurship so that they can then take it no matter what they're doing or where they're practicing. So we also yeah, I mean, I can go on and on. So, you know, Lisa, you'll have to tell me when you want me to stop.

But you mentioned we had, a story slam, which happened, I think it was in last month, in March. And for those who don't know, a story slam is a live story telling event based around a theme. and hours, of course, is specific to nurses and nurses at Penn. Either clinicians, students, faculty or alumni who told six minute stories about, a theme, which this year's theme. I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I'm

completely blanking on what this year's theme was. But the stories were so engaging, Every year, this was our fifth year. Every year they make me laugh. They make me cry. They inspire me to, you know, just be better and do better and promote our profession in a way that I think most people don't generally get to see nurses in this way. So for a really good general communications event so that the public can really get a sense of what nurses do outside of what they see, maybe in the media or on, you know, television shows that don't often portray our profession in the best light. The story slam is a great way to really hear from nurses and see what they're actually doing. So it's one of our best events we have in the innovation space at Penn Nursing because it always gets so much attention and we have so many people who show up and watch this event and I really do believe it inspires more people, to learn about, you know, what nurses really do.

Lisa Bonsall: Very cool. I think that's such a great idea.

Marion Leary: Yeah, it is. And, you know, I have to give a shout out to our partner, First Person Arts, who is also, it's a Philadelphia based nonprofit that, helps people learn how to tell their stories. and then they put on a number of events as well. And we've been working with them since the first story slam. And I wouldn't be able to do it without, Dr. Neil Bardhan, who is their Director of Applied Storytelling and co-hosts the event with me. And we spend a lot of time with our storytellers preparing them to tell their story. Storytelling is an art. It's a craft. And, we put them through a workshop where they learn how to write out their story, they learn the different parts of a story and then help them to perform their story, because it is, at the end of the day, a storytelling performance. So it's a great event. And and I love working with our storytellers as well. My my job is fun. I get to work with a lot of really cool people, doing a lot of really cool things.

Lisa Bonsall: Well, I get the sense that it is fun, but you work really hard. You're doing a lot of things. You have a lot of balls in the air. So, thank you, because you really do portray our profession so wonderfully, from what I see in your interviews and you know what I hear on your podcasts and what you're sharing on social. So I do thank you very much for that. What advice do you have for new nurses who are just joining the profession, or even established nurses who are looking to be more innovative or share their innovations?

Marion Leary: Yeah, I have a lot of things to say about this topic. First I want new nurses and established nurses to know that there is a community of like-minded individuals who have found innovation, have found entrepreneurship, and who are thriving. And so if you are one of those people who know that this is the space you want to be in, you know, reach out to me, reach out to others. And there's the Society of Nurses Scientists, Innovators, Entrepreneurs & Leaders, called SONSIEL, which was established five years ago. Full disclosure I'm a founding member and was on the board, but it really is a great space to find your people. I hear from nurses a lot that, you know, until they found other people who were equally as excited about innovation, they were really getting, burnt out with the work they were doing in nursing and didn't think anybody really understood them in a way that, you know, this community of nurse innovators really does. You know, it's really hard as a bedside nurse to have an idea and not really know how to take it to the next level. there's not a ton of institutions that are focused on nurses as innovators right now. It's growing. I know for a fact it's growing, but there are still a lot of nurses who want to innovate and but don't know how or where to turn. And so if you're one of those nurses and

you want to innovate, there is a community out there, I promise you, and you can reach out to me and I will connect you, and I will share all my wisdom. because the profession needs you.

Yes, we need nurses at the bedside, but we also need nurses solving the problems we're all seeing on a daily basis. And you can do both. And it doesn't have to be one or the other. Like I said, it can either just be a new mindset and you can learn that mindset or you can, you know, you also can create these innovations. There's lots of ways to take it. And nursing is such a versatile degree and profession, and there are so many different things you can do as a nurse. You can work at the bedside, you can work in the military, you can work as a politician in Congress. As we've seen with numerous nurses. You can work in a startup, you can do research, you can do education, you can do law, you can do storytelling... the list goes on and on. As a nurse, you are an expert in a variety of different areas. And so knowing that you have many options to use your education and your experience in that way and, you know, a lot of people say they are leaving nursing. But it's not about leaving nursing. It's about using your nursing degree in a different way. And if that's not the bedside, it's not the bedside. But we need you in the profession.

Lisa Bonsall: That is a perfect ending. That's wonderful. We do. We need all of the nurses to stay in the profession in some capacity, because our perspective is unlike any other. So thank you so much.

Marion Leary: Unparalleled. Thank you Lisa. I really appreciate it.

Lisa Bonsall: Thanks, Marion.

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