Are you a nursing student or just starting out and wonder, "How do I become involved in SCI nursing? What's it like?" 3 nurses share their journeys.

Lao Tzu quipped, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Every nurse comes to the world of SCI through different paths of opportunities and experiences. Unlike other tracts our SCI colleagues may follow, there isn’t always a specific path to becoming an SCI nurse. The following article will share the journeys the three of us had in landing in the wonderful world of SCI nursing by taking that first step.

I started my journey into the world of SCI as a Neuro ICU nurse after working on a general medical unit. My uncle became a patient in that ICU and the nurses were so amazing, caring and knowledgeable, I felt the timing was right to take the next step in my career and become an ICU nurse. I loved caring for persons with acute SCI and helping them through the initial phases of recovery after injury. I enjoyed supporting their families through education of what was happening and what they may be able to expect and accepting, at times, the degree of unknown that may come with a spinal cord injury.

I chose to pursue a Master’s Degree program for my Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) Degree which led me to completing my clinical rotation with the CNS who leads our Outpatient Spinal Cord Injury program. She has such passion for her work and in my witnessing the magic of what Rehabilitation can do for the persons we serve, I learned so much in terms of not only the chronicity and effects of SCI, but also how challenges can be mastered in not only persons with SCI, but in any condition that patients needing Rehabilitation present.

After graduation, I was honored to land my first job as our Inpatient Rehabilitation CNS continuing to work with persons with SCI and other conditions, as they begin inpatient rehabilitation and partner with our team on the journey to live in the community once again. Within this role, I developed a special interest in wound care, teach our SCI nursing curriculum to new hires within the Neuro-Rehabilitation division and am consulted to educate other acute care nursing units on evidence based care for persons with SCI, when spinal cord injury is not their specialty and promoting the best patient outcomes. My single step is hopefully a long journey in the world of SCI.

Wendy R. Worden, APRN, CNS, MS, CRRN

My SCI journey began as I was encountering my first medical-surgical rotation during nursing school at Marquette University. As a designated education unit (DEU), the inpatient SCI unit was selected for mainly VANAP (VA Nursing Academic Partnership) students, who had an advantage to be placed in VA-only rotations.

I immediately fell in love with everything SCI-related, and was granted a second rotation there the following semester, per request. My love must have been apparent, because shortly after graduation, I was recommended by our clinical instructor (the unit’s RN educator) for an inpatient position and hired immediately.

Each time someone asks me why I do what I do, I try searching for words of commitment that would even partially convey how profoundly I care about my work with spinal cord injury patients. It was an
explicit choice of mine to remain a full-time staff nurse on our inpatient unit, while continuing my full-time master’s degree (nurse practitioner) education. It was also an explicit choice to ask one of our SCI attending physicians, a never-ending wealth of spinal cord injury knowledge and fantastic mentor, to be my preceptor at the Milwaukee SCI center during my first clinical rotation as an NP student.

In graduate school, we have frequent discussions regarding our personal nursing practice, and how we adopt our own practices as we begin to think of ourselves as future providers. It’s through these discussions that I’ve found the reason why A) I don’t think of a certain eastern continent when someone says “ASIA” and B) why ambulatory guys make me do a double-take. SCI and rehab used to comprise solely my nursing identity, but has since evolved into my actual identity, as I prepare to become an independent provider in a few short months.

I could say I am a nurse who loves SCI patients, but truthfully, my patients have made me a SCI nurse. Every patient, every rehab meeting, every therapy appointment has shaped me; reminded me of the gratitude owed to those patients and providers I’ve encountered in the past 3 years. The passion I have for SCI and rehab has become purpose; I am indebted to turn this purpose into practice in an advanced nursing role, and give my SCI patients everything they need to be successful. I owe them the best of my ability, and my utmost potential for all they’ve inspired in me.

Elizabeth M. Sullivan, RN, BSc., MSN(c)

All nurses have at least one thing in common—they want to help people. Not only do they play the role of caretaker for their patients, but in some circumstances, they can also be a friend, a confidante and a trusted adviser. It takes a special kind of person to fill all of those roles the way nurses do and this I found to be especially true with the spinal cord patients.

I wanted to become a SCI nurse when I started working at the Veteran’s hospital. I really want to help people through some of their most vulnerable moments. I have been a nurse for thirty–five years and I believe SCI is my true calling, as I have found a home. Before I worked in the SCI division, I worked as a Neurology and Physical Medicine Clinic (PMR) Coordinator for ten years, dealing with MS, ALS and patients from SCI that had rehabilitation and spasticity issues. I enjoyed working with the spinal cord patients in the clinic setting.

I completed my Master’s degree in 2013 and I am a Clinical Nurse Specialist, ACNS-BC. I used by degree to focus more in depth on the SCI/Neurological patients. I have found this to be not only challenging but enjoyable as well. I help to provide our staff with the best evidence to ensure that we are practicing within the scope of our nursing license and that the veterans are receiving the best care possible. Working here in the SCI division is my career dream job.

Tammy Soukup, MSN, RN, ACNS-BC, CRRN

Students, as you begin your career in nursing and we hope that the reflection of our journeys will spark something that guides you into the world of SCI. If you have been an SCI nurse and are just starting out or have been an SCI nurse for decades and mentor the next generation, we ask that you reflect on what
brought to the wonderful world of SCI, the impacts you have made and continue to make and all of the opportunities that inspire YOU along your journey. Are you willing to take that single step?