



Bernadette Taniton and Fay Dolphus (Délne)



Caption: Fay Dolphus (Left) and Bernadette Taniton (Right) are Home Support Workers in Délne.

Community Health Nurses (CHNs) throughout the NWT are quick to relate how important their Home Support Workers (HSWs) are to the wellbeing of their Home Care clients. CHN Wendy Flood has been in Délne for 12 years and in that time has worked closely with HSWs who she describes as an integral part of the Health Care team. “We are so very fortunate to have Bernadette Taniton and Fay Dolphus as part of our team here in Délne,” she says.

Bernadette Taniton started as an HSW about 17 years ago. “I had always been interested in health,” she says, “I was hired part-time in Délne at first, and got to like working in home support. I had the chance to take the training offered at Aurora College in Inuvik (at that time). It was a three weeks in, two weeks out program. The training was really good: the knowledge I got from that gave me confidence in my work. When I started full-time I really understood what a home support worker could be.”

Fay Dolphus also attended Aurora College. "The education was really useful," she recalls. "One of the things I remember learning, and that is part of my practice every day, is about respect and it is called DIPPS: Dignity, Independence, Preferences, Privacy, and Safety. This is what home support is all about. I learned about this and it is still true." Fay goes on to say, "The elders were so independent for almost all of their life. So it's a big change to them when they start to need help. So we (HSWs) help to maintain their dignity and independence as much as possible. We encourage and support them to continue to do as much for themselves as they can."

According to CHN Wendy, "Fay is adaptable and very self-directed when faced with challenges on the job, which has more to it than most people realize." Wendy explains that the role of the HSW has, "...evolved exponentially over the years. Basically they have gone from being housekeepers to health care providers." Wendy says, "Faye and Bernadette have been able to meet each new (learning) challenge with grace and determination. Fay is confident in her skills and her care. Fay works hard to continue her learning in order to bring the best possible care to our Home Care clients, and Bernadette has developed her skills as a HSW in so many ways over the 12 years I have worked with her. Bernadette is always determined to gain new knowledge and learn new tasks."

Bernadette says she feels very supported in her role by the community nurses: "The Nurse-in-Charge and the CHN, they stand up for us at times when it is hard for us HSWs to say "no" when we are being asked to do things that aren't part of our job. It's hard to say no but sometimes you have to say no, and sometimes we need help to say no, so it is very helpful that the nurses are there for us."

Wendy adds, "(Bernadette and Fay) are skilled professionals who have the ability to recognize abnormal states, including vital signs, in each of our clients individually and promptly bring it to the attention of the nurses. There have been times, for instance, when they recognized excess fluid in a client with congestive heart failure, delirium in someone due to an infection, increased blood pressure. I could list many examples of when they have been the eyes and ears of the health care team and spotted things that needed to be addressed."

Fay remembers one of these times: "There was one elder who we were checking his vital signs every week and at one visit he didn't look right and he said he didn't feel right and when I checked his blood pressure it was way low. So I let the nurse know and he ended up getting a pacemaker. So then he felt much better and the family was thanking me for doing the check and realizing something was wrong. Those kinds of situations make me feel that my role is important and that HSWs are part of the health care team."

Wendy says this is a good example of how you need initiative and professionalism to work in home support. Bernadette agrees and says, "I am part of the health team and I have learned a lot about health and health promotion. I try hard to understand the disease so that I can translate it to the elders. Sometimes when we are talking, they already know something about it (the disease) from their own traditional knowledge and they can tell me

things in their native tongue, and tell me the words for things. But what they don't always know is the modern treatments and the health care they can get so I translate for them what the nurse says and that gives them hope and we can work on it together."

When asked what she likes about the job, Bernadette says, "I like to be going out into the community, not staying in an office but going around and seeing elders and helping them with their day-to-day activities, and personal care. It's fun to take them for a ride around the community, maybe attend events in the community like birthdays. The elders like to get out, too, it's good for them and they don't always have somebody who can help them do this so that is where the HSW comes in." "Bernadette has such a gentle caring spirit," says Wendy, "and it comes through in the respectful, quiet care she provides to our home care clients, and also in the way she supports the other members of our Health Care Team in Délne."

Fay relates how she decided to leave a career in Finance and switch to home support. "My grandfather was living at home," she says, "and he was in his 90s and my mother was looking after him and she was in her 60s. And I was helping out, too. That got me interested in caregiving as a career because I saw how rewarding it could be. I had been working in Finance but I realized I should have started out in caregiving right from the beginning because that was what I really wanted to do. It was all because of my grandfather, he played a big role in my decision."

Both Bernadette and Fay have found that being able to speak their language has been an important aspect of their work. "Because I am in a community and speak my language, early on I realized that my language would be a key part of the job. When I first started, the elders I worked with all spoke their language and many of them spoke no English at all. Now, many of the elders do speak at least some English but even if they don't need translating they are still more comfortable speaking their language," says Bernadette.

"Relationships and trust is a big part of it," says Fay. Sometimes our elders don't have family nearby. So we (HSWs) do friendly visits. We take that role as a person interested in them, like a family member, who they can depend on. We let them know that anything they tell us is confidential. I always assure clients that what they say and do is between them and me, and that information is shared with others only if they want me to. That is the basis for the relationship, and it gives them trust." "Fay is a dynamic, energetic, caring individual, who brings everything she has to offer to her clients on a daily basis," says Wendy.

Bernadette says with her training and experience, she is not shy about being with elders who have cognitive challenges. "It can be sad to see what dementia what it does to people," she says, "even if they can't remember my name, they are still people. They still want company; they still are happy to see me and are able to enjoy things. If someone has dementia but is physically healthy they can still go visiting, go for a walk, chat about things and see the community. I know one lady with dementia who liked to sing Dene love songs, it's a tradition and it's also funny and makes people laugh and so that way they are still part of the community, being able to make people laugh."

Asked about the challenges (of being a home support worker), Bernadette says, "Sometimes when I am working with an elder and their adult family members are there as well, I wonder why the family doesn't do more for their elder. Family members don't always understand the role of the HSW, we are not housekeepers and it's not our job to do the chores (laughs). I am trained to support elders with their care needs and that is what I am best at and what I like to do best."

Adds Bernadette, "Something people may not realize about our work as HSWs is that the elders give us their blessing. I remember the blessings the elders have given me through the years, and I treasure those blessings in my heart. It is hard to describe in English what a blessing is; for some things in our language there is no equivalent in English. But when they give a blessing in (North) Slavey, it has to do with story-telling and the spiritual realm. Even for those who are no longer with us, their spirit goes on in the blessings they have shared. For me, that's the rewarding part of this work."