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Editorial Question?

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Crash Cart's Inventor? A Nurse, Of Course!

An ED supervisor from upstate New York developed this staple of emergency medicine, building the prototype at home in her spare time.

Debra Anscombe Wood, RN

Times have changed, as any nurse who has practiced for decades will say. Back in the 1960s, ED nurses responded to cardiac arrest codes throughout a hospital, carrying in their arms whatever supplies and equipment they might need — that is, until 1967 when a Buffalo, N.Y., nurse came up with a better idea.

Anita Dorr, RN, the ED supervisor at E.J. Meyer Memorial Hospital (now Erie County Medical Center), knew that every second counted. Time spent collecting the various equipment meant delays in care, so Dorr decided to build a "crisis cart," which later came to be known as a crash cart.

"She developed this cart because she thought her nurses shouldn't be trying to run with all this equipment to the scene of a cardiac arrest to help," says Joanne Fadale, RN, CEN, ED supervisor at Erie County Medical Center. "She designed it so that it would be mobile and have everything on it you would need to do a cardiac arrest procedure."

Dorr enlisted the support of her staff in compiling a list of items typically carried to codes. With the help of her husband, John, she carefully measured each piece of equipment and in the garage of her home built a prototype holding a blood pressure cuff, cardiac arrest board, cardiac monitor defibrillator, cutdown tray and IV equipment and solutions, medications, glass syringes, airways, portable oxygen, and a suction machine nurses could pump by foot. She even thought to include a clipboard for documentation and a warning bell that nurses could ring as the cart sped down the hall.



for life. I was afraid that if I left the cart here, someone would just take it."

Fadale thought the ENA was a fitting spot for the cart, since Dorr was one of the original founders of the group and a strong proponent of education for ED nurses. She spoke at national nursing meetings about her invention and sought recognition for the specialty. Dorr asked nurses in her department to join her

fledgling Emergency Room Nurses Organization and pay dues — just \$2 in those days. She even persuaded a local physician to contribute \$1,000 for her new association's start-up costs.

"She knew what she wanted and got what she wanted," Fadale recalls. "She was a tenacious lady. Going after something, she didn't stop until she got it."

Preserving the cart

Hospitals around the world now use crash carts. Newer carts are smaller than Dorr's model and filled with disposable products and prefilled syringes. Erie County Medical Center kept using the original cart in its major trauma room for years, long after more compact commercial crash carts became available. The hospital retired Dorr's cart in the 1980s after regulations came out mandating that carts be constructed of metal to decrease the risk of disease transmission.

For a while, Dorr's cart disappeared into storage. Then all of a sudden one of Fadale's nurses noticed a maintenance man using it.

"We asked that it be given back to us, and one of my staff nurses took it home to her grandfather's garage and put it back the way it was supposed to be, painted it, and labeled everything," says Fadale, who had kept the original design drawings.

Fadale wanted Dorr's cart to look much as it had when the tall, willowy leader created it. So she scrounged around Erie County Medical Center's old storage areas and found glass syringes and other antiquated supplies. Fadale shipped the cart to ENA with the old equipment used during the 1960s and early '70s.

Unfortunately, Dorr never patented her invention before she died of lung cancer in 1972, says Fadale. She feels her mentor never received appropriate credit for her drive and ingenuity.

"In our archives at the hospital, we know where it came from and where it was designed," says Fadale. "It was the talk of the town and one of the things that attracted me [to the hospital's ED]. This was new and upcoming, and you knew this department was not going to be boring."

Debra Anscombe Wood, RN, is a freelance writer based in Orlando, Fla.

"It was clear we wanted the cart preserved.... But it needed to be where [Dorr] would be honored and where it would be preserved for life."

"The cart was designed to fit right up against a stretcher," says Fadale, who used the equipment for more than a decade. Items for respiration, such as airways, were stored closest to the place where the cart would line up beside the patient's head. Medications were kept in the middle drawer, and items used for IVs were stored at the end — adjacent to the foot of the bed — to allow access from either side. The red-painted wooden cart proved so popular that the hospital added several more.

Fadale joins Dorr

Dorr hired Fadale in 1970, straight out of nursing school, to work in the ED as a general duty nurse. Fadale wasn't sure what type of nursing she wanted to practice, but thought the ED would expose her to a wide variety of specialties.

Dorr "took me under her wing and made sure I learned everything I needed to know as an emergency room nurse," says Fadale. "My orientation lasted six months."

Dorr was a forceful leader — and somewhat dictatorial: She'd been a major in the Army Nurse Corps during World War II. Still, Fadale enjoyed working for her and 19 years later stepped into her shoes, so to speak. As ED supervisor at Erie County Medical Center, a Level I trauma center, Fadale donated the cart in 2000 to the Emergency Nurses Association in commemoration of the ENA's 30th anniversary. It remains on display at the organization's national office in Des Plaines, Ill.

"It was clear we wanted the cart preserved," says Fadale. "We had it in our department for a long time. But it needed to be where [Dorr] would be honored and where it would be preserved