

Tar Heel Footprints in Health Care

A periodic feature that recognizes individuals whose efforts—often unsung—enhance the health of North Carolinians

Jenny Faulkner



As the public information officer for Alamance-Burlington schools, Jenny Faulkner is responsible for communications, marketing, media relationships, and community relations for 36 schools and 22,500 students and their families. According to colleagues,

Faulkner is quick to volunteer to work in the community and consistently provides strong leadership. Therefore, when a pertussis outbreak began in Alamance County schools in November 2011, Faulkner became the point person to coordinate communication efforts between the local health department, school administrators and staff members, students, parents, and the Alamance community. [For details on this outbreak and the public health response, see the commentary by Bass and Turpin-Saunders on pages 420-424.]

Faulkner states that the greatest challenge during the management of this outbreak was its timing, as most of the communication efforts coincided with the school system's winter break. Pat Lynn, retired Director of Student Data, recalls, "For well over an hour, on that Christmas Eve afternoon, [Faulkner] read off children's names, and I provided her with all the contact information I could find for each child so health department officials could make phone calls to families. Had parents not been contacted immediately, the outbreak would have spread."

In the following weeks, Faulkner and her colleagues worked closely with Alamance County Health Department staff members to identify students with pertussis and to notify others who may

have been exposed. Once a confirmed case was reported, Faulkner reached out to the Transportation Department to determine whether the student rode a school bus; if so, staff members identified the student's bus route and determined which children were exposed in transit. Similarly, staff members in the Student Information Services department gathered information about possible contacts in the school and also reported back to Faulkner. Over the course of the outbreak, hundreds of students with connections to the pertussis outbreak were identified, and most received prophylactic antibiotics. Having an efficient protocol allowed Faulkner and her coworkers to help direct the public health response and answer any questions that came their way. The outbreak protocol was used throughout the remainder of the 2011-2012 school year for subsequent incidents of pertussis.

Lucy Kernodle, the lead nurse for Alamance-Burlington schools, worked closely with Faulkner throughout the pertussis outbreak. Kernodle remembers Faulkner's positivity and calm demeanor. "She realized the importance of collaborating with the Health Department and the importance of the overall public health of our community," said Kernodle. "She did this never seeking any recognition or attention. She is truly an unsung hero and Alamance County is a safer, healthier community because of her contributions." **NCMJ**

Electronically published September 27, 2013.

Elizabeth Chen, North Carolina Institute of Medicine, 630 Davis Dr, Ste 100, Morrisville, NC 27560 (Liz_Chen@nciom.org).

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0029-2559/2013/74521