



## Marge in Charge: Safety Coordinator Leads the Way to Environmental Health

By Michelle Miranda

The minimum training qualifications for a hospital safety coordinator include a bachelor's degree in safety or a health-related field and a few years of experience, but that might make the position sound easier than it is. Marge McFarlane's advice to recent graduates who want her job? "Good luck!"



McFarlane is the safety coordinator and a member of the Green Team at Sacred Heart Hospital in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. As she reels off a list of her responsibilities, it's easy to understand her concern for inexperienced newcomers. Over the course of her career she has worked on hazardous waste for the laboratory, hazardous waste for the hospital, ocean compliance, management of material safety data sheets, emergency

management, infection control, and eventually management of the entire environmental care of the hospital. "I think that they'd be overwhelmed in a heartbeat," she said in a phone interview of anyone who came into her position with only a bachelor's degree under their belt.

McFarlane was at one point the only person responsible for the management of the hospital's environmental care, including safety, security, hazardous materials, and emergency management. No wonder she tells new employees that she's "Marge in Charge." It seems that her meticulous adherence to the rules and ultra-organized methods have not only earned her a respected reputation within the hospital, but have also warranted recognition from without.

Last month Sacred Heart Hospital was inducted into the Practice Greenhealth Environmental Leadership Circle, receiving an Environmental Leadership Award (ELA) for exceptional standards in waste reduction and pollution prevention. The hospital was one of only six new inductees this year. Of course, McFarlane isn't the only one who deserves credit for the prestigious award, but she did play an integral role in the hospital's safety success. "I think you need to be committed and really interested," she said of her job in health and safety. And she is.

### A Calling to Care

McFarlane was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on May 24, 1951. Her father was a factory worker for General Electric, and her mother was a registered nurse. Marge's family life greatly influenced her interests and aspirations. Exposed early on to the unglamorous lifestyle of the nursing profession, she knew that there was at least one thing she could rule out as a future career. "I always knew I was going to be medical, not nursing, from the time I was very little. My mother was a nurse. I was not going to be a nurse. My idea of nursing from a very early age is that people can throw up on you and you have to say, 'There, there. It's OK,'" she recalled.

When she was five years old her brother Art was born developmentally disabled and multiply handicapped. The McFarlane family revolved around doctor visits and medication and care schedules. "It was always 'Take care of Art, take care of Art,'" Marge said. "I think that I saw [my mother] care for him — we have a very strong faith — and it was just 'This is what our mission was to be.'"

As a sophomore in high school McFarlane attended a career fair, where she was introduced to the medical technology field. She was drawn to the idea of caring for people and knew immediately that it was the right career path for her. "My heart was set, and I never wavered," she said. "Medical technologies then offered me an opportunity to be of service to people in the way that I wanted, without having a lot of excessive direct contact with patients."

Marge's decisive and determined nature was apparent even as a young teenager. She decided what she wanted in a career and followed through on it. After graduating from high school in 1969, she married just months later, enrolled in the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and had her only daughter the next year. In 1974 McFarlane graduated with a bachelor's degree in medical technology and went on to work as a medical technologist at St. Mary's Hospital in Milwaukee.



Environmental Health and Safety Professional Profile

**From Medical Technologist to Hospital Safety Coordinator**

In 1988, after deciding to pursue a master's degree, McFarlane acted on the advice of her supervisor at the time and chose to study environmental and public health, one of the few public health master's degrees with an environmental focus. "I learned to inspect restaurants and do air pollution modeling, and I know about the hydrogeology of the arsenic in the ground water, but the last class I took was hazardous waste," she said. Marge found herself fascinated with the field. "It was worth four years of school. I was just so taken with the ability to make a list, find out where it's supposed to go, make sure everything's going in the right spot, and I was home. I mean, that was just my path," she said.

McFarlane, who at the time was working as a medical technologist at Sacred Heart Hospital, put her environmental and public health knowledge to good use. After inquiring with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources about chemical disposal, she successfully led the laboratory through a full inspection. "And so then the hospital said, 'Well, maybe we need to have you take a look at these other issues throughout the hospital,' and that is how I got started on the hospital level, as chemical hygiene coordinator," McFarlane recounted.

The evolution of Marge's career was not left up to luck. She took a proactive and invested approach to her work, never satisfied with just doing what was in the job description. Before McFarlane the hospital's approach to safety was divided, as each department handled its own safety concerns. But as chemical hygiene coordinator for the hospital Marge saw that there were a lot of other safety issues that needed to be addressed. "I was out and about my business looking at chemicals," she said. "Then I saw other safety issues, other safety issues, and other safety issues. And so I lobbied for a safety position."

McFarlane received a second master's degree in risk control and safety from the University of Wisconsin-Stout in 1998. It seems that Sacred Heart Hospital owes much of its safety success to Marge's relentless efforts. She targets one safety hazard at a time and has brought the hospital a long way in the 23 years she has worked there. In just the past three years there has been a 10% overall reduction of

biohazardous waste, even though services have increased by more than 25%.

**Marge's Secrets to Success**

"I grew into this job, and I think that has been the secret to my success. I picked up these tasks one at a time," McFarlane explained. For anyone who wants to pursue a career in environmental health and safety, McFarlane suggests an environmental and public health degree, a firm grasp on the chemical aspects of environmental issues, tenacity, and commitment.

"Don't give up. Do as much education as you can," she suggested. Marge thinks that it is important to know what you will be responsible for and to know the regulations and laws that correspond to those responsibilities. "I had a lot of responsibility without a lot of authority, but when the regulators walked in the door they all looked at me," she recalled.

An interdisciplinary education helps, too. A typical day for Marge might include talking to nurses, construction workers, and maintenance. "It's critical because otherwise you don't speak the right language," she said. Having to collaborate with so many different groups has taught her that it is important to be politically savvy as well in order to limit the pushback. Though she started out with all safety concerns on her shoulders, she now collaborates more closely with a security officer, a facilities director, the patient safety and quality coordinator, and the chair of the hospital's Green Team, and is only at the hospital two days a week.

Since McFarlane started in 1988, she has seen the field of environmental health and safety come to the forefront. But there are still changes she would like to see implemented. "I want to see the regulatory government agencies of the United States get together and formulate a plan so that we can collect household pharmaceuticals without a problem," she said. With the field becoming more popular and the media focusing on such issues, perhaps professionals in health and safety will soon see those changes. Until then, McFarlane continues to tackle one safety hazard at a time and even dedicates some of her time to passing on her wealth of knowledge. "I am interested in teaching at any level. I currently conduct in-services for various



The most jobs— anywhere

Environmental Health and Safety Professional Profile

organizations," she said. "I have been a frequent safety speaker for state conferences and have presented to the State Societies for Nutrition Services, Risk Management, Medical Technology, and Histology," she said.

It seems future health and safety professionals have a lot to live up to.

EmploymentCrossing is the largest collection of active jobs in the world.

We continuously monitor the hiring needs of more than 250,000 employers, including virtually every corporation and organization in the United States. We do not charge employers to post their jobs and we aggressively contact and investigate thousands of employers each day to learn of new positions. No one works harder than EmploymentCrossing.

Let EmploymentCrossing go to work for you.