



## Jack-of-All-Trades Physician



Dr. Susanne Levene on a recent trip to Europe. This photo was taken in Austria. PHOTOS COURTESY OF DR. SUSANNE LEVENE

# Dr. Susanne Levene

Prison doctor trained as a surgeon finds opportunities to use skills and learn new ones

BY GAYLE M. IRWIN

**S**usanne Levene, MD, employs her skills as a general surgeon and implements new knowledge as a physician for the Wyoming Department of Corrections.

She primarily serves inmates at the State Penitentiary in Rawlins, however, she also travels to the Medium Correctional Institution in Torrington, the Women's Center in Lusk, the Honor Conservation Camp in Newcastle, and the Honor Farm in Riverton when needed. Each facility provides occasions for her to use her surgical knowledge for consultations and also gives her opportunities to learn and implement new skills.

"The complexity and variety of patients I see are actually much more interesting than a routine medical clinic. It's more like being an emergency room doctor and a jack-of-all-trades," Dr. Levene said.

Many inmates "either have had no medical care at all before

they came in or they've had medical problems that they never addressed," she said. Therefore, she sees people with cancer, diabetes, strokes, heart attacks and other diseases, as well as those with extensive trauma after major inmate-on-inmate assaults. She likes to surgically remove all kinds of lumps, bumps, and skin cancers. Breast biopsies have also been done and one male inmate is now on Tamoxifen for atypical ductal hyperplasia.

Dr. Levene attended medical school at the University of Colorado in Denver and moved to Wyoming with her then husband, an orthopedic surgeon. Dr. Levene became the practicing physician at the state penitentiary in 2013 and stayed about two years. She pursued other opportunities but returned in 2018.

"It seemed like I was a good fit because I was very curious; there were a lot of interesting cases I was seeing," Dr. Levene said. "I was learning a lot, and I realized that I had a good way with the inmates by being thorough and not just listening to what they were saying but also going the extra mile to research the complaints. I was just going to take the job for a little while, but I've been there now for almost five years."

One case she found intriguing involved a man who developed a mass on the side of his jaw. She said, "it was tiny," and her request for an ultrasound was denied by the insurance carrier.

"They wanted me to try to treat him with antibiotics first, and so we did that," Dr. Levene said.

However, two weeks later, the growth had enlarged.

"By the time I finally got the ultrasound, it was already quite large, and then we followed that with a CT scan," she said. "He had this huge parotid mass—it was growing into his neck along the carotid artery. We got a biopsy and it was an anaplastic parotid tumor—it was just consuming him."

She obtained authorization for the man to go to a Denver cancer surgeon.

"He removed the whole thing [but] it recurred, and he ended up going to Torrington to get further chemo," she said. "Finally, the provider over there wanted to get another biopsy because he wanted to try some new gene hormone therapy."

Dr. Levene drove to Torrington to see the patient and perform another biopsy for the proposed gene therapy.

"He ended up passing two weeks after that. It was the fastest growing tumor I think I've ever seen."

Another incident involved a prisoner in Torrington who was being treated for painful hemorrhoids, a diagnosis the man received when visiting emergency rooms and while in county jail, she said.

"He was transferred to me from Torrington to take care of the painful hemorrhoids. Since I have a professional anoscope

and I am a surgeon, the Torrington provider thought I could manage this better," she said. "So, I see the patient, and I immediately realize he's got a large rectal cancer."

She works with nurses who evaluate prisoners' symptoms and conduct routine checks, such as monitoring blood pressure and assessing potential colds.

"The nurses prevent me from having to see the runny noses and sore throats, which are often main complaints," Dr. Levene said. "If the inmate has a medical concern, they fill out what we call an HSR, a health service request, and they write down their request. Let's say they have a runny nose and a fever, and they write that ... then the symptoms are in the HSR and then the nurse goes off to evaluate them ... They present these patients to me, and usually I manage them without having to see them. I may order Mucinex or maybe ibuprofen or maybe I'll order an X-ray. The nurse will put the orders in and then if I need to see that patient later, they can put that order in as well."

She added, "My job is to take care of the medical necessity of the patient. We cannot fix everybody's bone-on-bone arthritis in their knee and we can't fix everybody's rotator cuff. I have to assess whether they really need something or whether they just want something. I also have the ability to send nurses out to do blood pressure checks so I know for sure whether the blood pressure medication is working."

A medical officer escorts the Rawlins inmates to Dr. Levene, however, the Torrington prisoners enjoy more freedom.

"They can come down to the clinic by themselves," she said. The medium correctional institution in Torrington includes an inpatient medical unit on the property and a hospice wing.

Sometimes prisoners need greater care than can be done at the Rawlins prison clinic, and therefore, special approval is needed for off-site visits to medical facilities due to safety and security concerns.

"It's not that easy to get the inmates out for off-site appointments," Dr. Levene said. "You have to be able to make a good, strong case to be able to get your inmate out for an MRI or a CT scan or even a surgical consult. I have a better background, I think, to be able to put the data together and to be able to get my off-sites approved."

Trained as a surgeon, Dr. Levene pursues learning other aspects of the medical field in order to help patients on-site.

"I've learned a lot of different things, and I'm trying to learn how to do my own ultrasounds," she said. "We have an X-ray



Dr. Susanne Levene in her home with her dog, Cole.

machine, and I know how to take my own X-rays and send them off for reading. If I have a guy with acute shortness of breath and I'm wondering what's going on in the lungs, I can do that."


An X-ray technician comes to the prison once each week "to do the routine X-rays," she added.

Dr. Levene believes the work is interesting enough that she considered having WWAMI students come to observe and learn. However, the warden did not support this endeavor and therefore no medical students will be rotating through at this time.

Her daughter, Sierra, is part of the WWAMI program, and is considering becoming a surgeon like her mother.

"She kind of grew up with that interest, and so I'm very proud of her," Dr. Levene said.

As she continues implementing her medical skills, helping Wyoming's inmates, Dr. Levene embraces the work.

"It is an interesting profession," she said. 

An advertisement for Mountain Health Co-op. The top half has a dark purple background with the Mountain Health Co-op logo (a stylized 'M' with two dots) and the text "MOUNTAIN HEALTH CO-OP". Below the logo, it says "Proudly partnering with you for a healthy Wyoming." The bottom half of the ad shows a young child with a wide smile, wearing a grey knit beanie and a black and white striped shirt, sitting in a field of fallen autumn leaves.

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