

A COMMUNITY OF CARING

STORIES OF CARING AND COMPASSION AT UNC HEALTH NASH



Heart disease has become a leading health challenge for women, often presenting with subtle or misunderstood symptoms that can delay recognition and treatment. In rural communities, where access to specialty care can often be more limited, these challenges can create gaps in early detection, intervention, and prevention.

In Nash County and the surrounding areas, one physician is working to bridge those gaps.

As an Interventional Cardiologist at UNC Cardiology at Nash, Dr. Sheetal Patel doesn't just treat patients with complex heart disease—she builds lifelong relationships rooted in education, trust, and compassion. Her work spans beyond the walls of the hospital, as she also practices at UNC Internal Medicine & Pediatrics at Middlesex, where she offers primary and preventive care to families in rural and underserved areas. This approach is all part of her mission: to make heart health accessible, personal, and equitable.

“For a long time, heart disease was called a man's disease,” Dr. Patel said. “It wasn't that women weren't having heart attacks—we just didn't know enough, because the research didn't include us. Women don't always present with chest pain or the symptoms we're taught to look for. So, if the medical community didn't understand it, how could we expect our patients to?”

That gap in knowledge has affected many women over her career. Dr. Patel recalls one of her first patients—a woman who experienced flu-like symptoms for months and struggled to fully recover. Eventually, she was diagnosed with severe heart failure. Like many women, her symptoms were vague and easy to overlook—not just by herself, but across the broader medical community at the time.

Stories like that have fueled Dr. Patel's determination to do more than intervene after the fact. She wants to prevent the need for emergency care in the first place.

“Women are often the ones holding their families together—working, caregiving, running the household—and in all that, they put themselves last,” said Dr. Patel. “But if you don't prioritize your own health, it's going to catch up with you. Taking time for yourself—whether it's for nutrition, movement, or rest isn't selfish, it's necessary.”

Dr. Patel's approach is grounded in whole-person care and fueled by innovation. She was the first physician in the UNC Health system to perform a below-the-knee scaffolding procedure using Esprit, a dissolvable device that restores blood flow in patients with peripheral artery disease. The procedure, completed in the UNC Nash Cath Lab, offers life-changing results for patients suffering from

chronic pain, limited mobility, and critical limb ischemia.

“Dr. Patel has a remarkable ability to make every patient feel seen, heard, and truly cared for,” said Wanda Sohn, Clinical Manager of UNC Cardiology at Nash. “She meets people where they are—whether she's breaking down complex procedures in ways that make sense or guiding someone through meaningful lifestyle changes. Her compassion is matched by her ability to communicate clearly and build trust.”

Outside the hospital, Dr. Patel is a familiar and reassuring voice to 1.5 million homes in Nash County and the surrounding region. She's a recurring guest on WHIG-TV's Here's to Your Good Health show, where she translates complex clinical topics into conversations that empower everyday people to understand and protect their heart health.

This same passion for outreach is what led Dr. Patel to create the locally renowned UNC Nash Annual Women's Heart Fair—a free, community-wide event that brings women and their families together to learn, connect, and take charge of their health. Each year, the fair offers screenings, CPR demos, nutrition education, and direct access to care, all in a welcoming and supportive setting.

“Dr. Patel has a true passion for women's heart health and plays an active role in our collective community outreach,” said Meredith Hayes, RN at UNC Cardiology at Nash. “Her commitment to the Women's Heart Fair shows in every phase—from planning and fundraising to set-up and clean-up the day of.”

Hayes' colleague Tera Joyner, RN, echoed those thoughts.

“She's often one of the first to arrive and the last to leave. During her 'Talk with a Doc' lectures, she shares valuable insights and makes time for one-on-one conversations with attendees about their individual health concerns. Her presence has been instrumental to the event's success, and we're so grateful to have her on our team.”

But if you ask Dr. Patel, it is all worth it – even if only

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– Devin Jones

one person is reached with important health education.

“My goal is always that if even one person at our events recognizes symptoms of heart disease and seeks help sooner, or one person makes a meaningful lifestyle change, that event is a success. I hope we reach more than one, of course—but if even one person takes that step, I feel it was worth it,” Dr. Patel said.

That belief is reflected in everything she does—not just in public events, but in the way she shows up for her patients every day. At UNC Health Nash, Dr. Patel is a steady presence for those she serves, whether they're coming in for a routine follow-up or navigating a life-altering diagnosis. She listens closely, answers questions with care, and makes sure every person feels heard, supported, and empowered.

And for the families she cares for, that level of attention makes a lasting impact.

“Dr. Patel cares so well for our mother and we could not ask for a better provider than her,” said Devin Jones, daughter of patient Brenda Jones. “When you are in her office, she treats you like you are the only person there. You are her most important priority. Her love for her patients and genuine kindness and concern for their wellbeing is so refreshing in a time when it's easy to not feel heard or understood. We just cannot overstate how genuinely focused she is on our mother's wellbeing.”

In every exam room, event hall, and community partnership, Dr. Patel is redefining what it means to care for the heart—especially for the women whose lives depend on it.

“If we want to raise a healthier generation, we have to start with healthy women,” Dr. Patel said. “And that means education. That means visibility. That means saying out loud that women's heart health is important—not just to us, but to everyone who depends on us.”



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