

NBHC graduates first corpsman from new training program

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Hospital Corpsman Melissa Vertner recently became the first graduate of the 12-week Corpsman Required Skills Course at Naval Branch Health Clinic (NBHC) Meridian on May 13.

Vertner received a new stethoscope during the ceremony as a symbol of her achievement.

"I feel that I have succeeded and accomplished a lot," Vertner said. "I have set a path for more junior corpsmen to get through the course."

The course entails one-on-one, undivided attention with the instructor teaching corpsmen how to respond to casualties and injuries in combat situations.

NBHC Meridian Physician Assistant Lt. Christopher Sharpe said that the course teaches junior corpsmen to be efficient not only while on shore duty but when they deploy to the field.

"The ultimate vision and goal for these corpsmen is to serve in combat... on the front line...by themselves, independent of any medical support," Sharpe said. "So, we teach them how to effectively communicate what they see, hear, feel and touch to a medical officer that may be 40, 60 or 100 miles away. If I drop a corpsman off 60 miles from the wire in Afghanistan, I want to be comfortable that they can tell me what they see or what they have, so I can make a decision whether or not a MEDEVAC helicopter or a 12-man, three-truck unit is needed to pick somebody up in the middle of IED alley, or tell them to hang on

a little while."

Sharpe also said the course is more than evaluating patients at sick call; corpsmen are taught 'cradle and grave' medicine.

"Basically, they pick up the chart, check the patient, do their vital signs, take their history, do a complete physical exam, make a diagnosis, then come up with a treatment plan and lastly, a follow-up," Sharpe said. "A corpsman might end up in the back of a Humvee with a gear bag, and I believe every single corpsman should walk out of this clinic and effectively operate in combat."

The course also teaches corpsmen how to tackle administrative issues including light duty to limited duty boards, physical evaluation boards and how to read x-rays. Corpsmen will also learn how to interpret basic labs.

Vertner said the skills course was tough to complete.

"When I first started it was really difficult, but once I grasped the idea, it allowed me to excel," Vertner said. "I realized I can help other corpsmen understand it a lot faster and easier."

NBHC Meridian Officer-in-Charge Lt. Cmdr. Roger Caron said there is a need to develop corpsman programs which train and prepare them for the real world.

"There is great value to these types of programs, but none of the previous programs ever satisfied us," Caron said. "Because of that, Lt. Sharpe developed this course based on experience, as to what level, the types of diagnosis, and care a corpsman should be proficient in."

Sharpe feels the skills course should remove the corpsman from their comfort zone.

"What I found is that while in Iraq and Afghanistan, a lot of the junior corpsmen who were deploying with us were assigned to health records or some other administrative functions," Sharpe said. "I've got E-4s, E-5s and sometimes E-6s and E-7s that can't treat combat casualties."

Vertner highly recommends that her fellow shipmates take the course.

"You don't want to be the corpsman in the battlefield not knowing what to do when your fellow soldiers are out there dying," Vertner said. "Once you get a grasp of the course (and graduate from it), you know you are going to work to the best of your ability when you get out there in the field."

Caron and Sharpe hope to expand the course to other branch health clinics.

"Currently this course is available only on board NAS Meridian," Sharpe said. "Ideally, we would like to move this towards branch health clinics such as Pensacola, Millington, Panama City, Whiting Field, Gulfport and even our Army counterparts at Camp Shelby."

Caron believes this course is essential to every corpsman.

"There is a certain expectation of proficiency and care that a junior corpsman should provide to an operational command," Caron said. "We are training junior corpsmen to meet these expectations. That's the whole point of this course."