Opportunity for nursing leadership

I was asked recently to give a presentation on the significant issues for nursing service policy from a global perspective. I thought I would take the opportunity in this Editorial to share what I learned in preparing that presentation. Clearly there are challenges ahead in health care—but there are also opportunities for nurses to provide leadership.

Around the world, the challenges ahead in health care are daunting. Changing population demographics and family profiles are unfolding in many countries with growing numbers of aged individuals and proportionally fewer younger individuals. Mobility is escalating and multiculturalism is flourishing. Yet, we live in a world of threats from unrest, violence and war, as well as natural disasters. Disparities between urban and rural dwellers, and between the rich and the poor are growing. At the same time, disease characteristics are changing. The fight against communicable diseases has gained ground, while challenges regarding non-communicable disease are mounting. Scientific and technological developments are advancing diagnostic and treatment capabilities while at the same time generating complexities and leaving mounting financial pressures for health care. Finally, there is a looming spectre of ever-increasing shortages in the number of health care providers.

In the midst of this rather daunting picture is the reality that nurses are found in so many settings and embedded in the lives of so many people. They are key health care providers around the world and have the potential to offer leadership for positive change.

However, if nurses are to be able to make positive contributions, we have a major challenge ahead of us—we need to create practice environments in which nurses are enabled to practise to the full scope of their capabilities and quality patient outcomes can be achieved. We need policies that establish and support the growth of such an environment.

The types of policies that will establish and support this type of practice environment are ones that aim to achieve the following goals:

Promote a patient/client centred philosophy: This includes the provision of care that is respectful of, and responsive to individual patient/family preferences, needs and values, and ensures those values guide all clinical decisions; for health care providers, it means consciously adopting the person’s perspective about what is important and what matters to them—working with individuals rather than doing things to or for them.

Foster a learning environment: This includes placing value on continuous or lifelong learning; cultivating a culture of questioning, openness and flexibility; rewarding critical thinking, problem-solving and innovation; and focusing on continuous quality improvement.

Ensure procedures and programs are evidence based: This means adopting perspectives and strategies that reward the use of research evidence to inform decision-making in daily practice; designing processes to incorporate evidence into clinical policies/programs; and introducing approaches to implement evidence-based programs and policies in clinical settings.

Maintain appropriate nurse-patient ratios: Having appropriate numbers of suitably qualified nurses has been strongly linked with patient safety, quality patient outcomes, staff satisfaction, quality of working life, and financial savings for institutions.

Offer a system of accountability: For nurses, such a system includes clarity of roles and responsibilities, clearly stated expectations for performance, and being held responsible for not just tasks, but also for interactions (how we communicate) and patient outcomes under our control. Having a documentation or record system and specified ways in which staff members receive constructive feedback on a regular basis helps to support a system of accountability.

Foster professional development of nurses: With the rapidly changing nature of knowledge and its potential to influence practice approaches, nurses will need access to education at both a generalist and a specialist level. Career pathways need to be clearly laid out for nurses together with available mentorship and fellowship programs.

Support the development of nursing leadership: This is an issue of central importance because the leaders are the ones with the responsibility for embracing the vision of an empowering practice environment and bringing that vision to life. Leadership is vitally important within the hierarchy of an institution, but it also needs to be clearly evident at the point of patient care. The voice of nursing needs to be present and strong throughout the health care system. Patients and families need strong nurses.

We face a time of significant challenge in health care around the world. Nurses are a critically important member of the health care team and can make a significant difference in the lives of patients and their families. But to have such impact, nurses must be able to work to the full scope of their education; only then will we see quality patient outcomes. Leadership is needed to implement policies that facilitate the breadth of practice performance for which nurses are capable.

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