Newsworthy nurses or just bad press?

As a professional nurse who heads up a unit that works to improve the evidence-based practice of specialist nurses and the effectiveness of the training they receive, I am concerned about the repeated bad press that nurses and health care providers continue to receive in South Africa and further afield. While it is certainly true that there are nurses who have ‘behaved badly’ in South Africa over the past few years - as happened during the service strikes of 2010 - it is also true that nurses are under great pressure to provide effective care to patients while carrying much of the burden of HIV-related illnesses in under-resourced and under-staffed clinics and hospitals in the country. I would argue, however, that it does not help to report on these negatives alone.

For example, at the recent Building Children’s Nursing for Africa conference, which was held in Cape Town in April, nurses met to share and commend nurse-led, evidence-based scientific research carried out in Sub-Saharan Africa for improved health outcomes for Africa’s vulnerable children. While one newspaper headline for the conference urged that ‘Healthcare needs nurses to cope’, coping was by no means the actual agenda of the three-day conference. Instead, with no time or desire to sit with heads buried in ‘exhausted’ hands, over 140 nurses and health care practitioners gathered as specialists in their own right, from afar afield as the UK, Kenya and Madagascar, and as close as Cape Town’s local hospitals and clinics, to share significant outcomes from nurse-led interventions conducted during their care of Africa’s children and families. Here nurses took up a fresh call to stand as advocates for both their young patients and their profession and to find pride in their profession as more than ‘just’ nurses.

Interestingly, the child nursing conference coincided with this year’s Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Congress and Exhibition, where a second year nursing student from London, Molly Case, read her poem responding to the bad press received by nurses in the UK. In 'Nursing the Nation', Molly protested, ‘ We don’t want some tar brush
crushing our careers before they have even started... How can you say this about people so big hearted?’ Molly and her colleagues issued the UK media with the following challenge instead: ‘Why don’t you meet us, come shake our hands? ... Let us air the facts.  [We] don’t want to meddle, just want to show you, so listen to us.”


It would appear that nurses across the globe are tired of misrepresentation. At the same time, it is evident that nurses need to actively engage with the public and press by speaking up more clearly on the many triumphs experienced in a profession that requires a complex mix of knowledge and skills, along with exquisite rewards of making a great difference to people on a daily basis.

International Nurses Day, this Sunday 12th May, will celebrate and highlight this integral role that nurses play in health care service delivery across the globe. Notably, nurses are the largest of the health care professions in the world! The International Council of Nurses (ICN) reminds us, therefore, that:

“Nurses are often the only health professionals accessible to many people in their lifetime... [N]urses are particularly well placed and often the most innovative in reaching underserved and disadvantaged populations. Nurses are educated to understand the complex nature of maintaining health and wellness, and the impact of psychosocial and socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment and ethnicity. They see the context for wellbeing and accordingly act so as to reach beyond the immediate presenting problems.”

(https://www.icn.ch/publications/international-nurses-day/)

For this year’s International Nurses Day, the ICN has placed special focus on nurses’ integral role in the achievement of the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Their chosen slogan, ‘Closing the Gap: the Millennium Development Goals: 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1; serves as a countdown to 2015 – the target date set for the achievement of the MDGs. While it is unlikely that all goals will be reached by 2015, nurses have done much, both internationally and at home, to shape and
improve health care services for the poorest, least represented and most disadvantaged in their communities.

With such achievements often occurring one day at a time – behind the scenes, at the bedside of sick patients for instance - criticism towards the profession may continue to rail. Equally so, however, South Africa’s nurses will continue to carry on innovating and tenaciously providing the care they see needed, where needed, as they best can...

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