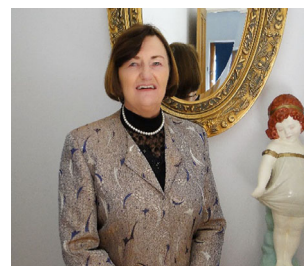


Nursing and Health Policy Perspectives

The contribution of nurses to health policy and advocacy requires leaders to provide training and mentorship

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Abstract

At this crucial stage in nursing's development, key organizations around the world are voicing the need for nurses to become more involved in leadership, advocacy and policymaking. The importance of leadership and health policy training cannot be overemphasized. However, the widespread education and training of nurses about policy is yet to be realized. Moving nurses from being the recipients and implementers of health policy decisions to being leaders with a strong voice in the development or reform of policy will take concerted, strategic effort into the future. We argue that for nurses around the world to take their place at decision-making tables and to be rightfully engaged in policy, health reform and advocacy, nurse leaders need to provide them with access to well-thought-out policy training programmes. This access needs to be wide-ranging, from exposure to policy knowledge in undergraduate education to more specialized graduate programs focused in every specialization on some aspects of policy, through to a variety of continuing educational opportunities.

Keywords: Advocacy, Nursing Education, Leadership, Policy, Policymaking, Policy Training

Nursing is on a professional wave of news lately. This includes the announcement of the 2020 Year of the Nurse

and Midwife; the campaigns of *Nursing Now* and the *Nightingale Challenge*, and celebrations of the 200th anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birthday. An important landmark

document for the future planning for nursing will be the release of the 2020 State of the World's Nursing report by the World Health Organization. This report will describe how nurses can contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and Universal Health Coverage and will be a seminal document for policy development for the next 3–5 years (WHO 2019).

These are exciting times for nursing. In concert with these events, the International Council of Nurses, the World Health Organization and other important bodies are asking nurses to step up to the mark and get more involved in leadership, policy development and advocacy. The current campaigns mentioned above are helping to drive leadership training for nurses. Because nurses have an intimate knowledge of patients and their health status, and the factors that affect these, they can make unique and sustaining contributions to how health policy is shaped.

Health care and public health systems around the world operate within frameworks of health policies. These health policies vitally and directly affect the delivery and availability of care for populations, health outcomes, health disparities, health equity, and the environmental, socio-cultural and industrial contexts of health workers. As a profession, nursing has a responsibility to be involved in health policy development to improve the health of people everywhere. However, nurses have not fully realized their potential when it comes to engaging in health policy, advocacy and leadership. Nursing is the largest component of the health workforce everywhere, but the profession has not yet realized its 'potential to profoundly influence policy and politics on a global scale' even though it is the 'moral and professional obligation of nurses to be engaged in legislation that impacts their patients' (Rakow 2016). Influencing politics and policies that improve healthcare delivery has a direct linkage with advocating for patients, their families and communities.

A number of reasons have been given for nurses' lack of involvement in health policy and politics, and the barriers to nurses being more involved are complex and vary from country to country. These include a lack of support, resources and time for nurses to do so in their workplaces. Sometimes there are real bureaucratic walls which act as barriers to nurses being denied opportunities to openly voice their policy concerns, for example because they are government employees. And too often nurses lack confidence and skills in policymaking and do not understand the differences or connections between policy and politics. How often have you heard nurses complain about policies that are not well-thought-out, or are underfunded or under-resourced, or that have not involved nurses in their formulation?

With serious nursing shortages facing many countries that are only expected to become worse, nurses can no longer afford to let others make health policies without their input. The very basis on which nursing operates to provide safe, effective care is under threat in many locations. A lack of sufficient, well-educated nurses means greater patient workloads, higher patient morbidity and mortality, higher nurse burnout, less job satisfaction, being involved in more ethical issues in the workplace, unsafe work practices and greater intention to leave the profession. Nurses need to learn to frame better patient outcomes with safe staffing levels using evidence-based practice and explain this evidence to policy makers and leaders (Aiken 2018).

Educating nurses about policy

At the heart of nurses not being involved enough in policy, politics and advocacy is the gap in their education about these important matters. For nurses around the world to take their place at decision-making tables, and to be more fully engaged in policymaking and reform, they need to have the requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes. This will help their motivation to be involved in policy. Nurses need access to well-thought-out policy training programs. Such programs need to teach nurses to be more politically savvy to help shape policies, to gain access to and use resources wisely to improve health of people. Politics and policy are at the heart of health care and improvements to population health, and also directly impact the working environments and conditions of nurses.

With these issues in mind, we call on national nursing associations and other nursing organizations, nurse regulatory bodies, nurse leaders and educators to join together to strategize about how nursing policy training can be implemented and supported in each country. This includes reviewing and modifying curricula so that policy is included in all programs to varying degrees. For example, this can involve teaching an introduction to policy and policymaking and the role of nurses in this at undergraduate level, as well as providing more substantial content and skills training at master and doctoral levels in policy, politics and advocacy. Content can be taught in stand-alone courses or integrated into relevant existing courses. Wide-ranging access to policy training using many teaching methods and access points should be available to all nurses as a continuing education strategy, both in online and workplace forums, and involve mentorship in policy. This training at all levels of nursing education can help nurses to learn how policy and advocacy are central to patient care and the working lives of nurses and healthcare systems.

Learning from countries such as the USA and UK where nurse policy involvement has increased and has shown success

is vital. Learning from and sharing experiences with other disciplines is also important, such from the discipline of medicine which has a sustained history of successfully influencing health policy. Interdisciplinary mentorship is an important means by which nurses can learn best practice in informing and implementing policy initiatives. The implementation of workplace clinical multidisciplinary forums in collaboration with informed academics, to strategize on policy and advocacy will not only help contribute to the growth of health leadership, but also the policymaking and advocacy skills of nurses.

Health policy research in nursing

Unfortunately, nurses' involvement in health policy studies is still quite small when one reviews the research literature, but research that informs health policy has enormous potential. At graduate and post-doctoral levels, undertaking evaluation of health policy, laws and regulations is central to understanding how to develop health policy to benefit the health of the public and will expand the knowledge of nurses regarding the complex workings of health systems. Studies that are targeted at helping understand how populations can get better access to health and health equity will provide valuable information to policymakers, health leaders and the profession of nursing. Nurses everywhere need to develop skills in developing and proposing new healthcare policies and implementing

these. Through policy research, nurses can gain skills to be accepted, respected and better informed where it matters, to be recognized as health professional with policy and advocacy skills. They can better inform policymakers and thus contribute to the implementation of Universal Health Coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals.

So, come on nurse leaders, work together to provide real opportunities for nurses to be educated to be better involved in policy and advocacy! The time is ripe for this to happen, and now more than ever before we need to follow the traditions of Florence Nightingale in influencing governments to make changes in health and health care.

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