

Politics and Power: Nursing in Canada

By Senator Lucie Pépin

Speaking about issues that are of great concern to us all, brings me back to my roots. It brings me back to the people and the profession which first sparked my passion for service, for change and for public action.

I began my career as a nurse in the 1960s. And it led me directly to a life of public service. The spark for me was the recognition that the rights of women in the health care system were not being adequately addressed - I was incensed at the lack of control women were allowed over their bodies. This spark led me to fight for the establishment of birth planning services across Quebec; to fight for women's rights to choose; and for women's right to sign medical authorizations, for themselves and their children. The rest is history.

When synthesized [my career] into a couple of sentences, the process seems so easy. Get mad, get passionate and get out there!

I am the first to admit that social change is not easy. It is possible though, and if I bring you any message, I bring the message that you are powerful and that I feel very hopeful about the current position of the nursing profession and its power to effect positive change in Canada's health care system.

But first let's look at what we need to effect change: anger, passion, confidence and action. Let's start with anger. Well, the nursing profession certainly has a lot of material to draw on there.

Nurses are a lot like mothers in our society - undervalued and underpaid. And the relationship between nurses and decision-makers in Canada reminds me a lot of the mother-child relationship - nurses are taken for granted until there's an emergency, and then suddenly our worth is recognized and our presence essential. But this recognition is usually fleeting and often comes too late.

In case you aren't angry already, let me provide a little status report on the nursing profession as we head into the next millennium. In the words of our federal Minister of Health, "*No professional group has borne the brunt of health care restructuring more than Canada's nurses...*". In the last few years, it is mainly, if not only, the nurses who have lost full-time employment and income as well as witnessed the de-professionalization of their profession.

Since 1992, more than 20,000 full-time nursing positions have been converted to part-time or casual. This is in addition to the thousands of nursing positions that have been abolished. With only 51% of Canadian nurses working full-time, the rest are obliged to sew together careers in a variety of work settings, with a variety of employers. This makes it very difficult to provide the continuity and quality of care that is the cornerstone of the nursing profession.

As cutbacks come down, the corresponding workload goes up. A 1998 study out of Laval University's Faculty of Nursing found that three out of four nurses felt they no longer had time to do

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their jobs properly. With little job security, coupled with the stress of balancing more than one employer and an increased workload, is it any wonder nurses complain of burn-out?

To add insult to injury, nurses are being replaced by less-skilled health care providers. The logic of the decision-makers is simple - less-skilled means less costly. Forget assessing the effects of this switch on effectiveness, productivity or quality of care. Results are measured in terms of the bottom line.

What is a nurse's reward? Not much! Over their entire career, the average nurse will see his or her income grow by 36%. Compare this to an accountant, whose income will grow by 193%, or a secretary, whose income will grow by 72%. Are you angry yet?

These insults comes at a time when we are talking of shifting from institutional to community-based health care; from treating illness towards health promotion; from research on biomedical mechanisms to social determinants of health. Nurses are essential to each of these areas of reform.

Nurses make up the largest body of health care providers in the system. Nurses are the front-line providers, and those closest to client needs. The nursing profession is the profession eliciting the most trust from the Canadian population.

You are all essential to the success of the reform measures we are trying to undertake in our health system. And yet you are treated by our decision-makers as if we could live without you.

You are not systematically included, by governments or health administrators, in decision-making around health care reform, even though you know the clients best. While governments give out bonuses and revenue increases to doctors and health administrators, nurses must wage prolonged battles for even a minimal recognition of their due. I cannot help but believe that if the nursing profession were dominated by men, the situation would be very different indeed. The value of the profession would not be systematically undermined and demeaned.

But wait, worse is yet to come if we do not act fast. Studies show that we will shortly be facing a severe shortage of nurses. The nursing profession is aging, many nurses are leaving the profession and the recruitment of new nurses is dropping steadily.

Why is their declining retention and recruitment of nurses? No surprises here. When surveyed, former nurses and would-be nurses claim the following factors influenced their decisions to leave or never enter the profession: lack of status, little decision-making power, few opportunities for promotion, excessive

non-nursing duties, terrible working hours, and inadequate income.

There is nothing very new in these facts and statistics that I have just run through. But I hope that hearing them again has made you angry. . . angry and passionate enough to mobilize for change. Have I hit the spark yet that will lead you to action?

Anger and passion are sometimes difficult for women. Especially coming from a profession grounded in empathy and compassion. We sometimes feel guilty for our anger, we feel shrill and powerless when we speak out forcefully about our passions. We may suddenly doubt what we have to say or feel that we are asking for too much.

"Get mad, get passionate and get out there"!

In a recent issue of the *Canadian Operating Room Nursing Journal*, Dr. Kathryn May, Director of the School of Nursing at UBC, described nurses in this way:

"Canadian nurses have an affinity for the brakes. They have to look everything over and over, from every angle. Is there a possibility that we can be making a mistake? Has anyone else done it? What will the physicians think? What will the administrators think? What will my mother think?"

Welcome to nursing - but also, welcome to being a woman in Canada! So what to do? How to move from anger to action? For action you need confidence - confidence in your abilities as an individual. Confidence in the abilities of nursing as a profession. Confidence in the process of change.

In order to build that confidence, let us start by getting a sense of the power, and the amazing contributions of the nursing profession. Nurses have been on the front-lines of all major innovations in Canadian health care. Nurses have been on the forefront of introducing a holistic approach to medical care in hospitals. You have been instrumental in the ongoing shift from institutional to community-based care. And you have softened the transition and filled the gaps in multidisciplinary health care provision. You have also encouraged the integration between medicine and other fields such as social work, midwifery and ergonomics, to name a few.

Let me take a minute to site a few examples of

how the nursing profession is changing the face of medicine in Canada while saving costs and ensuring quality care, all at the same time.

In Ontario, a pilot project has been tested for clients being admitted to hospital for total hip replacement surgery. In order to reduce patient anxiety and the length of postoperative hospital stays, a pre-admission education program is offered. It is offered by a multidisciplinary team, two members of which are nurses. It has been evaluated as a success. Clients participating in the program were less anxious than those receiving no pre-admission education and hospital stays were reduced leading to an estimated savings of over \$50,000 for an 18-month period.

In another success story, hospital nurses in Alberta have been instrumental in shortening the hospital stays of patients recovering from open-heart surgery by two days. Nurses identify heart surgery clients capable of being discharged early. Nurses then coordinate and manage the transition from hospital to home and the follow-up home care necessary for full recovery and improved health. It is estimated that, in one year, this program was able to reduce the average waiting time for open-heart surgery from 157 to 87 days. These are two good examples of the value the nursing profession brings, in terms of its holistic perspective and the essential link it provides in the delivery of integrated health services. Not to mention cost-savings and efficiency.

Nursing has never been more powerful !

While professionally, the nursing profession is soaring, politically it has never been more powerful. The Canadian Nurses' Association has been key in pressing the federal government to reinvest in the health care sector in general, and in the nursing profession in particular. Its *Quiet Crisis* lobby and the leadership it demonstrated through its co-chairing of HEAL has made it a force to be reckoned with. Thanks to these efforts, Health Minister Allan Rock has publicly recognized the essential role of Canada's nurses and has created a \$25 million dollar Nursing Research Fund, to support their retention and recruitment as well as the evidence-based practice of the profession.

The nursing profession is fighting for a health care system that most Canadians want publicly funded and centred on the patient. The five principles of the Canadian Health Care Act represent what the nursing profession is continually striving for - this gives you indisputable leverage.

Negotiations from Alberta to Newfoundland have

put the nursing profession in the news on a daily basis. While some may say that these stories paint a negative picture of the profession, I find the new images inspiring - thousands of women fighting for the health and well-being of millions of Canadians. Risking their jobs to ensure that the patient is at the centre of our health care system. Women fighting for a fair wage and collegial respect. While I do not mean to minimize the essential contribution of male nurses who are out on the picket lines fighting for these same causes, pardon my bias when I point to your female colleagues. It is so rare and so wonderful to see women in such a position of public strength and cohesiveness, emblazoned across our newspapers and television screens every day.

Given the incredible public trust nurses enjoy, I believe that most Canadians view the images of angry or striking nurses in the same light as me. Nurses are a very patient and responsible lot. It comes with the profession. If they are threatening strike action, it is because they have been pushed against the wall with short-sighted measures and unfair treatment. In their strike action, they are fighting, not only for their professional interests, but also for the future of our health care system.

That is what you are fighting for, is it not? The ability to care for others in a professional and empathetic way? We are surely a society on the precipice of trouble if we cannot put value in that. So go from anger to action with confidence. You are fighting for noble causes. You are well-placed to give your say on health reform. You have numerous and wonderful examples of the positive changes your profession is making and can continue to make in the health system. You have strong support from the Canadian public.

From anger to action

Go from anger to action - but what does action mean? First and foremost, action starts at the individual level. By gaining confidence in your capacities and the scope of what you can bring to your work. By interacting with other health professionals as an equal. By referring to other health professionals as colleagues and expecting them to do the same for you. By voicing your views and ideas openly and with conviction, regardless of who stands before you. By committing yourself to lifelong learning, so that your views and opinions are of value and are respected. By taking risks while playing on the team. By mentoring others that come after you.

It is a tall order, I know. And it is particularly hard

to keep your head up when you feel unfairly treated. But it is important to keep a few things in mind: Change takes time but it always comes about. You have power, much more than you know. And finally, taking and keeping the high road, invariably gets you where you want to be with honour and self-respect.

While striving for change, you must draw on the positive experiences in nursing. In the United States, there are exciting examples of nurses expanding the scope of their profession and increasing their job satisfaction. Sixteen hospitals in the United States, described as magnet hospitals, are seeking to improve the quality of services provided by nurses. They are doing so by promoting lifelong learning for nurses. The push for education is related to a drive for quality health services. With increased education, nurses are granted greater responsibility and their job satisfaction increases, simultaneously increasing recruitment and retention rates.

Modelled on the magnet hospitals

Similarly, in a recent article I was reading on the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, staff attribute its world renown reputation and success to its organizational culture. Collegial respect and team-work are the order of the day. With a singular focus on the best interests of the patient, the roles and responsibilities of all health care professionals are clearly defined and highly complementary. There is little hierarchy as everyone's contribution is known, valued and respected. Job satisfaction is high, turnover is minimal.

I raise these examples very briefly to demonstrate that other models do exist and that change is possible. And we have our success stories in Canada too.

Modelled on the magnet hospitals of the US, Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto has been very effective in improving RN employee satisfaction. The hospital is implementing the Primary Nursing Care model in which one RN takes primary responsibility for the planning, implementation and evaluation of a particular client's nursing care, from admission through discharge. This model is enhancing the continuity and quality of care while increasing job satisfaction. Nurses are encouraged to participate in constant professional development, both as learners and deliverers, while their time for this activity is compensated. At Mount Sinai, it has been documented that a reliance on RNs over less skilled health care workers has resulted in both productivity gains and cost savings.

If there is a message to be gleaned from these examples, it is this: Valuing the nursing profession, increasing the quality of health care and increasing

efficiency can and do go hand in hand.

As individuals and as a collective, nurses must promote this message and evidence from your success stories must go out. It must be brought to the attention of health care colleagues, administrators, policy makers, the media and the public. I must say that your provincial and national associations are doing a great job of disseminating this information and working in partnership with other health care associations to lobby for change. These associations have developed very clear positions on health care reform in Canada. And their efforts are bearing fruit on the national scene. But they need each of you to become involved, to become committed and confident in speaking and acting out. It is only when the nursing profession, as a group of individuals, takes its position seriously, fights for what it believes in and voices its views loudly and continuously, will the changes you want come about.

I know this is a difficult thing to ask of you. You are working so hard. The rewards are so few. You have important family demands on top of all this. Where can you possibly find the time to do more? I cannot answer this for you. All I know is that, in recognizing the power you have, in becoming part of a movement for change, you will find extra energy, extra creativity and drive that you never thought possible.

“Take a politician with you into the OR - fully masked and dressed and let them see what you do from start to finish. Then you'll get results.”

(Senator Lucie Pépin - Question Period, 1999 ORNAC National Conference Halifax)

Become engaged to improve your working conditions because it is your due. But ultimately, become engaged to help our health system survive and flourish. This is not about self-aggrandisement or aggressive marketing. This is about getting your message out to ensure that nurses continue making wonderful contributions in health care. You are best placed to act as the intermediaries between physicians, administrators, clients and other health care professionals. You have lots of leverage in our health system. Canadians appreciate and respect you. You must be convinced of what nursing has achieved for Canadians, so go out and find fodder for your fight. And then, to quote a great Canadian feminist and activist named Nellie McClung:

“Never retreat, get the thing done and let them howl.” ■