

Professionalism and Activism: One and the Same

BY PATRICIA W. UNDERWOOD, PHD, RN

To some, professionalism in nursing simply means getting an education, graduating, and then practicing, providing the best care possible. But to be a true professional, you must be concerned about the health care environment, the laws and regulations that dictate that environment, and how these myriad forces ultimately affect patient care.

A hallmark of professionalism is ensuring that our work environments are safe for patients and nurses alike, and that they uphold high standards of care. At facilities nationwide, nurses are uniting to voice their concerns about threats to patient care, such as the replacement of registered nurses with unlicensed personnel and the rampant use of mandatory overtime as a staffing solution. A variety of workplace advocacy and collective bargaining strategies are being used to address these challenges to our practice. Regardless of the specific approach, the tactic of unity is working.

The nurses at Nyack Hospital in New York and St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, MA, exemplify professionalism in the manner in which they recently united for a cause. In both facilities, these nurses believed safe, quality nursing care was being jeopardized by their hospitals' use of mandatory overtime for staffing. In these hospitals, like many others, nurses were told they had to work overtime -- up to 16 hours in some cases. After trying everything they could to change the staffing patterns at both hospitals and being continually rebuffed by management, the nurses went on strike.

No nurses want to leave their patients, and the nurses at Nyack and St. Vincent were no different. (I spent some time on the picket line with the St. Vincent nurses and saw their concern for their patients.) But these nurses felt that in order to provide the best patient care, they had to refuse unsafe staffing levels and the short-sighted solution of mandatory overtime.

In both cases, the nurses won! Both groups now have contracts that: (1) limit the amount of overtime that can be mandated, (2) allow the nurses to say no to mandatory overtime when they believe it to be unsafe for patient care, and (3) force administrators to look at long-term solutions to short staffing problems.

Another mark of professionalism is getting involved in the public policy arena via legislation and regulation that affect nursing practice and patient care. I recently worked with the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and

Justice on a joint project to develop a national agenda on address violence against women. Although there were nurses on the advisory council, none of the staff drafting the agenda were nurses, so it was exciting to have the opportunity to add nursing's perspective to this critical issue on a daily basis. When we individually or collectively lend our voices and ideas to legislation, regulations, or public policy, we speak not just for the nursing profession but for our patients. We also highlight nursing's role in health care to policy-makers and lawmakers.

We can also increase the visibility of nursing's contributions through another emblem of professionalism: belonging to our professional associations. As NSNA members, you already recognize the importance of this. I hope that once you graduate and begin your careers, you will continue to value the benefits of membership and join your state nurses association. When we band together, we have the resources to make a difference in our work environment and in the public policy arena.

For those of you graduating soon, your initial challenge will be to put your hard earned education to work for patients in a variety of settings. The *Code for Nurses* and the standards of practice developed by the American Nurses Association will support your practice at a professional level. Even if you don't have time to take an active role in your professional association initially, you can make a difference just by belonging. The more members and financial resources we have, the more effective we can be in achieving our goals at the local, state, national, and international levels. The success of the ANA lobbying on Capitol Hill testifies to the power of unity.

Now is a great time to be a nurse! Recent Harris and Gallup polls show that public trust in nurses is at an all-time high. I urge each one of you to don the full mantle of professionalism as you embark on your nursing career.

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