



Caring for Patients THROUGH Federal Legislation: ANOTHER SIDE OF NURSING PRACTICE

Not every nurse was meant to practice clinically. Those words, spoken by a nursing professor at the University of Michigan School of Nursing, made a lasting impression on me and on my nursing career. As a young student, I thought a Bachelor's of Science in Nursing would be the ticket to a one-track profession—clinical practice. While that practice could be in pediatrics, intensive care, public health, hospice care, wherever, each area revolved around the same premise, caring for patients. This is why I went to nursing school. Yet, as my education in nursing continued, I learned that there is more than one way a nurse can care for patients.



Looking back on my nursing education, I realized I was not a typical nursing student. I wanted to discover all that the profession had to offer. I did not take a nursing assistant position to supplement what I was learning in my clinicals. Instead I chose a position working with a nurse researcher, Dr. Sally Lusk, who investigated hearing damage in automotive workers. The work intrigued me because my father had built his career as a small business owner working with the automotive industry. This position was my first exposure to a different side of nursing, where nurses played an integral role in healthcare prevention. For two years, I worked as a research assistant learning about nursing

research, which laid the groundwork for my future education as a doctoral student. It was the final months of my senior year, however, that would be the starting point for my career in health-care policy.

During the final year of my BSN program, I was elected president of the Student Council (the undergraduate nursing student government). Our council worked on the first job fair to be hosted at the school, with representatives from the local hospitals and the military, it was a great success. As we

ate program that was recommended to me. I was amazed by her presence. She was kind, funny, direct, and welcoming of a timid nursing graduate. After my conversation with Dr. Kalisch, I was mentally preparing to take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) at the same time as my NCLEX so I could begin graduate school that fall.

I had asked Dr. Kalisch, “Don’t I need more clinical practice before I begin?” Her answer was simple, “You will gain experience along the way.” In the fall of 2002, I began my graduate

the University of Michigan, I secured an internship with Congressman Joseph Knollenberg for the summer. The second day of my internship on Capitol Hill, I helped write a speech that the congressman read on the House floor. Words that I helped craft were submitted to the Congressional Record. I immediately knew this was what I wanted. My summer in Washington, DC solidified my career path. I wanted to advocate for nurses and the patients for whom they cared.

That summer opened my eyes to how healthcare policy is developed. In each Congressional office, there are healthcare legislative assistants. Many of these individuals, who are in their early to mid-twenties, were drafting legislation. The vast majority had no clinical or healthcare experience. They learned about the healthcare issues that needed to be addressed from constituents, lobbyists, and investigating the case for themselves. Nurses make excellent healthcare legislative assistants and I wanted to return to Capitol Hill in that capacity.

After my internship, I began my doctoral studies at the University of Michigan School of Nursing to learn how nurses could be better advocates on Capitol Hill. When I finished my course work, I moved to Washington, DC to pursue a career as a nurse lobbyist. Finding a job was difficult in the beginning, but after a four-month fellowship at the National Institutes of Health, I was offered the Government Affairs Manager position at the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN).

I was so fortunate to be hired at AACN. The organization, which represents baccalaureate and graduate schools of nursing, was a perfect fit. At this point, I had spent nearly a decade in nursing school and understood many of the problems facing the institutions we represented. After 14 months at the association, I was promoted to the Director of Government Affairs. I assumed the role with enthusiasm and the hope that my work would directly affect nursing students across the country.



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were cleaning up, I was stopped by a nursing professor I had never met. Rosemarie Rowney, who spoke the inspiring opening line of this article, congratulated me on the job fair and told me she thought I would be an excellent candidate for the Nursing Business and Health Systems graduate program at the university. At the time, I had no idea our short conversation would change my life completely.

Senior nursing students, weeks before graduation, typically do not think about graduate school. I was no different. I was more concerned about finding my first nursing position and being a graduate in the class of 2002. However, once I secured my first job, I spoke with Dr. Beatrice Kalisch, director of the gradu-

ate program and Dr. Kalisch was right. I did gain the experience along the way. It was intimidating being in class with nurses who had been practicing for 15 years and were nurse managers or held other administrative positions. But to my surprise, they were welcoming of a young nurse. It was a wonderful mentoring experience for me and we were able to share knowledge.

For my graduate internship, I selected the Michigan Nurses Association working with the Director of Government Affairs. I loved every minute of my internship. I met with Michigan Congressional representatives and spoke to them about nursing issues. This rewarding opportunity allowed me to learn about the federal level. With the help of faculty at



As Director of Government Affairs at AACN, I help draft legislation for nursing education and research, write congressional testimony, work in various coalitions to promote nursing, and advise congressional staff on how to address nursing issues facing their states as well as nationally. Through my work, I advocate for the needed funding and federal legislation that will impact nursing education, students, faculty, institutions, and ultimately the patients who receive nursing care.

My nursing education opened each and every door for me. Had I not been enrolled in a baccalaureate program, I never would have understood how there is so much more to nursing than clinical practice. My professors, mentors, and colleagues helped guide my career in policy. I respect what they have done as nurses—educate the next generation, care for patients, run national nursing organizations, run federal institutes, work on Capitol Hill. I am proud and honored to advocate on my profession's behalf. I will soon finish my PhD and I hope to teach students the role nursing plays in healthcare policy.

For nursing students interested in a policy career, there are numerous opportunities to become involved. Many of the major nursing organizations that have a department of government affairs recruit nursing interns such as AACN, the American Nurses Association, the American Organization of Nurse

Executives, and the Association of Women's Health Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses. This type of experience will provide students with an understanding of nursing's role in federal policy development. Much like myself, students can also hold internships on Capitol Hill, with local state associations, and federal agencies.

When a nurse is ready to begin a career in policy, he or she must have some experience either at the local or federal level in healthcare policy. Positions

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such as a nurse lobbyist, director of a federal agency, committee staff for a key congressional committee, or staff for a member of Congress are only some of the opportunities for nurses with a policy background. Nurses even go on to be members of Congress like Representative Lois Capps, RN (D-CA) and Eddie Bernice Johnson, RN (D-TX).

If I could share *one message* with you, it would be this: It is so critically important to understand that your voice matters. Members of Congress want to hear from you. You are the experts on nursing.

If I could pass on *one piece of advice* to you it would be to remain passionate about your choice to become a nurse.

To stay passionate about your profession, no matter what type of nurse you were meant to be (clinical, policy, research), education is the key. Having a deep understanding of nursing theory, research, and policy can help you give better patient care, influence policy, become a nursing professor, or a nursing researcher. Remember, nursing is not a just a job, it is a career, and like all professionals, we must receive the highest level of education to excel in our

careers. I can say without hesitation that deciding to become a nurse was the best decision I ever made. ©



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