

RAISING THE BAR ON RESPECT FOR NURSING AS A CAREER

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INTRODUCTION:

Dignity is the state or quality of being worthy of honor and respect, which has two general aspects of human dignity and social dignity. Human dignity is defined as the inherent and integral value granted to an individual. Human dignity is in close correlation with social dignity, and proper recognition of an individual plays a pivotal role in determining this parameter¹. Dignity is described within areas such as respect, independence, capability and communication². In the nursing community, respect is defined as the honoring of nurses in terms of rights, privacy and human dignity by physicians, patients and their family members, and other nurses³. Capability is defined as the proper acquisition of occupational skills, knowledge and experience in a profession⁴. Among nurses, dignity could be achieved through professional interactions with patients⁵, their family members⁶, other nurses, medical educators, nursing students and physicians⁷.

Nursing has progressed light-years from the time Nightingale began her career in 1853, but it is clear we still have much work to do. Nursing has certainly earned the distinction of being the most-trusted profession⁸ Our collective challenge now is to raise that bar to make nursing one of the most respected professions as well.

Nursing is also a “profession” like doctors, engineers, or IT. Its origins as a distinct and secular profession can be traced to a school founded by legendary nurse, Florence Nightingale in England in 1860. This position as a profession was further cemented by “Nightingale Pledge,” (quite like Hippocratic Oath for physicians) developed in 1893. Further, the code of conduct for nursing professionals was also not unlike the physicians, i.e. of not only promoting health and preventing illness but in addition also caring for the patient who is experiencing varying degree of physical, psychological even spiritual suffering. Interestingly, before 1960, the focus of the nursing code was on nurses’ obedience to physicians, but since then till date, patient care has remained the corner stone of their activity. Thus, wholeness of character, which involves integrity, knowing the value of nursing profession and one's own moral values, is central to the value system of this profession. Currently health care system is plagued with numerous constraints, politics, vested corporations, and even self-serving individuals/groups. Often nursing professional is pressurized to do something that conflicts their professional values, such as to deceive patients, falsify records, or simply face and/or accept verbal abuse from physicians, administrators, even patients. However, in light of these pressures, maintaining integrity and do what is right and ethical is the crux of modern nursing code.⁹ At first, the nursing profession was forced into ancillary activity of physicians, as an appendage of physician's work, directed towards administration of “broom and poultice” and characterized by passive sub-ordination to physician in charge of the case. In Western society, in pre-modern age, the care of sick or infirm when not entrusted to servants was the duty of nuns, “Sisters”, and subsequently nursing professional (Sister!) took over this secular role. Over a course of time, the role of a nursing professional has evolved from a sub-ordinate to an independent stakeholder in health care delivery. However, old mindsets still persist and there is certainly poor public perception of nursing profession, and as such, they are grossly undervalued as a professional. Further, even within the confines of health care system, they become easy targets for the location of guilt and blame for poor practice by a failing and dysfunctional system. Further, hard physical and emotional work

environment coupled with inadequate financial rewards now makes the nursing profession as one of the most unattractive of all professions.¹⁰

As a result, few motivated and caring individuals are attracted into this profession. Consequently, the health care system, whether be it government or particularly private, is faced by a serious crunch of nursing professionals, and nursing has become one profession where there is a “steady hemorrhage of experienced nurses” from all health care facilities. Not only India but also countries around the world are facing critical nursing shortages, and globally, communities are challenged with growing health care needs but diminishing numbers of nursing professionals. It is projected that by the year 2020 the shortage of nursing professionals will be a staggering 20 percent below requirements.¹¹

CONCLUSION:

The nursing profession is at crossroads. The prestige of this profession has not kept up to its growth, and as a result, fewer individuals are joining this profession. There are several factors for the inability to grow, but the problems within the profession could be addressed not only by improved projection of the profession, better funding, and education but also by providing support to its practitioners.

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