

RECLAIMING THE PRIDE OF NURSES

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I recently watched a segment of CBS's "60 Minutes" featuring a story about South African nurses who made around \$5,000 yearly and were being recruited to work in the United States due to our nursing shortage. An articulate nursing professor from the University of Pennsylvania stated she thought this was appalling, as it was leaving South Africa with a worsening nursing shortage of its own. I had to agree with her, yet could not blame the South African nurses, who were promised \$25,000 salaries plus housing.

It also occurred to me that these nurses had been working under almost impossible staffing ratios, and one particular nurse had been at her position for over 20 years. The staffing in the United States will seem like heaven to them. We also are all aware of this very process happening in our own country, with nurses taking leaves from their current jobs to travel with an agency for six months or so.

This process, at best, is simply a shifting of the resources, and at worst, a contributing to the rise of medical costs. This vicious cycle of rising medical costs and, in turn, lay-offs and worsening patient-to-nurse ratios will continue until we find another solution to the nursing shortage.

Students in my Senior Nursing Issues class at Milligan College in Northeast Tennessee recounted stories of being ignored by staff nurses during their clinical training and told by others to reconsider their choices of career and even to "get out while they could."

We must reclaim our pride in nursing. We must tell our stories, mentor our peers, and take credit for all we do. We must be willing to go to high schools to recruit young, eager students and shine a positive light on our profession. We can tell these young people that a nursing degree will provide the opportunity for many diverse pathways within one career.

We can form "Sharing Stories" groups--meet at lunch and share our stories among ourselves. We can work at health fairs, write articles for local newspapers, or just tell our neighbors what we do. We can choose to never say "I'm just a nurse," but to tell others how our work is what keeps patients alive. Better yet, we can tell how our work is what brings families together, helps others be creative in resource utilization, helps our patients examine their spiritual meanings in life, helps empower patients to take charge of their own health, and yes, even helps our patients heal into the dying process.

We can begin by simply journaling our stories to ourselves to validate our day's work and to reminisce with awe about the importance of what we do. We must believe in ourselves, and take pride in ourselves, and this positive attitude will carry over to those around us.

KEEP THE "CARE" IN CARE PLANS

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In the early days of nursing school, faculty begin teaching the ABC's of sustaining life: Airway, Breathing and Circulation. Instructors repeat over and over again, "If they aren't breathing, nothing else matters." In addition to teaching this basic truth about prioritizing nursing interventions, it is equally as important for educators to ingrain another basic truth into their students in order to meet the challenges of a changing profession. From day one of nursing school, caring should be presented as an essential component of nursing. Parallel to each lecture and alongside each clinical experience, this theme must be relayed through discussion and role modeling. I often find myself using the phrases, "If you don't care, nothing else matters" and "Remember the ABC's: Always Be Caring."

In this time of nursing shortage, healthcare agencies are appealing to students by offering sign-on bonuses and flexible schedules. Schools are working diligently to recruit men and women into their programs. The media relays stories of hospitals that are understaffed and desperate for nurses. We see advertisements for the nursing profession on television daily and the newspapers are filled with available positions. With all of these incentives, it is likely that many young men and women are coming our way who are choosing nursing as a career for the wrong reasons. They may be applying to nursing programs out of a sense of obligation to fulfill the needs of society, or they may be responding to a parent's dream instead of their own. Students may be recruited for positions in local hospitals simply for the financial reward.

In order to maintain a future of excellence in nursing, educators must strive to maintain high standards for individuals seeking to enter the profession. During admission interviews, personalities will always differ; previous experiences and GPA's will vary. But let us look deeper into the person and accept nothing less than those who exhibit a caring spirit. While in school, caring can be enhanced through classes, clinical experiences, patients and fellow students. Let us not get caught in the mold of looking at grades as the only criterion for evaluating students.

Schools of nursing should never graduate nurses in quantity at the cost of lowering quality because of the nursing shortage. As educators, we have the responsibility to admit caring students, then foster and enhance this quality throughout the program so patients in this generation will be "cared for" with the excellence for which nursing has always been known. May we all stand for the highest standards in nursing education and hold our students and ourselves responsible for the essential "caring" element of nursing. ♦