

GUEST EDITORIAL - Tuyen Tran, BN, Master of Science (OHS), Director of Nursing, Villa Maria Centre, Unanderra NSW

AT THE HELM

I was asked to reflect on how I came to be at this point in time when I met the *AJAN* Editor at a Sydney, Australia, aged care conference.

It is a good time for me to think about my career and life experiences. For me, the key to success is to 'never give up' and I always look for new opportunities to be creative about dealing with challenges.

I am also a great believer in investing in others, empowering them, delegating and letting them get on with developing their skills - working with people. It is about learning to deal with challenges even if the situation is not easy. Where I am now, as a Director of Nursing, is only part of my story.

During my career there have been many challenges but one of my greatest personal challenges was to experience being a refugee from Vietnam. In the late 1970s I left my home country under very stressful circumstances. It was terrifying to board a fishing boat in the dark, to hide below deck out of sight of the authorities and take a huge risk to go to an unknown destination.

I arrived in Australia in 1979. I was only 23 years old. My son was born soon after arrival in Australia. I was one of 40 people on a boat going to Indonesia. Being in a boat from Vietnam to Indonesia was a frightening experience for a person who could not swim and the conditions on board were harsh. A stopover for a month on a small island in Indonesia allowed us to scavenge for food, mostly fish. When I look back now and think of the cramped space, no exercise and poor nutrition we were exposed to on the boat, it seems quite amazing that we survived that part of the journey.

We feared for our lives on many occasions. We spent five months in refugee camps in Indonesia before making further progress in an aeroplane on our journey to Australia, which was our choice of destination over America. My husband had relatives in Australia and we thought it was a place where we could find work and a lifestyle that we aspired to. We were overjoyed once our refugee status was confirmed in Jakarta, and we were permitted to fly to Australia.

I started life in Australia in a refugee hostel for five months with very little English to help me cope on a daily basis. I then moved to the inner city of Sydney and then on to Wollongong where my husband found work. I had learnt some English in high school - my choice of English over French turned out to be a good choice.

In Wollongong I was lucky to have a friendly neighbourhood centre nearby. I honed my English

language skills and became an interpreter. I still work as a casual health service interpreter today.

In the neighbourhood centre we learned many life skills other than English. I became a community 'helper' myself, for people needing legal advice, help to find housing, advice about child care and matters around women's health. Many people were on the dole and really struggled to fit into a different society. There were instances of racism but the women supported their men and the time here was full of promise of a better life.

In 1988, I commenced a nursing program because of an advertisement calling for applicants from a non-English speaking background. Interestingly, only a limited number of applicants came forward. Those who did were from an Italian/Macedonian background and I was the only person from a South East Asian background. The University of Wollongong program provided me with clinical experiences in a wide range of acute and aged care facilities.

On graduation in 1991, I worked in a residential aged care facility in the Illawarra region. At the time, I thought I needed to get experience in acute care settings. However, I soon came to realise that I needed to capitalise on the chances offered by the environment in which I worked. I was able to introduce ideas and practices that were novel to the setting. For example 'care planning' was new to the people with whom I worked. I quickly realised that I had some skills in management. Over a period of time I became a Deputy Director of Nursing and finally obtained a Director of Nursing position.

I have seen many changes in aged care, particularly since 1997 with the demands for better documentation and a change in accountability. At that time, residents were making more demands and were becoming very vocal. The system appeared to be letting them down, we needed to approach this challenge differently. Responding to their needs is very difficult when you have over 100 residents to care for and when nearly all of them are very frail. Their relatives cannot meet their needs and neither can we be complete carers for them in the way they hope as they live out their lives in residential aged care. I felt that if I had the answers I would be able to deliver the care they want, so I have constantly gone looking for answers to residents' needs.

In my present position, I have found I am able to bring my insights into the challenging demands for management of residential aged care in a contemporary way. I like what I do and I feel I still have a range of skills that can make a difference. I am thinking a lot about my registered nurse

colleagues, they are getting older so what will happen when they retire? I need a plan for the next generation. I wonder what my workforce will look like. I think my facility is a good example of ageing in place and I am very proud of that. I am pleased to be a leader to the nurses in my facility and am confident that my story models to them that nurses can make a meaningful contribution to enrichment of people's lives in many ways.

I am very goal driven and I could see that I could contribute a lot in the area of occupational health and safety. However, as soon as I feel comfortable with my job I look for a new challenge.

Interestingly, all those years ago although I saw opportunities for progression, I recognised that I firstly needed to convert my diploma qualification to a bachelors degree in order to have educational experiences that supported my practice and assisted me to achieve my goals. I observed that one serious omission in my practice setting was issues about occupational health and safety.

In the year 2000, I commenced my masters studies. I really enjoyed the challenge of meeting my new goal of providing better systems and processes within my organisation.
