

Reflections on nursing



GUEST EDITORIAL

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It was never really my plan to become a nurse. My mother wanted me to be a doctor; my father wanted me to be an engineer; and I wanted to be a pilot. Eventually I completed my registered nurse certificate in the hospital in which I was born in my home town.

During a break between school and university, I took a job as a 'wardsman' at the local hospital to earn some money to support my studies. After a couple of months the director of nursing summoned me and suggested I complete a certificate in nursing. By that time I had overcome my dislike of hospitals, enjoyed the environment and caring for patients and decided to become a nurse.

I entered nursing at a time when there were few males and those males who worked in nursing were often regarded as somewhat effeminate. Nevertheless, the early 70's were a time of liberation and Australian culture encouraged gender equality and equal opportunity. Our hospital, where I completed a three year certificate to become a registered nurse, strongly encouraged males to enter nursing. I must say at the time my family, who expected me to complete a science or engineering degree of some form, were quite taken aback, yet supportive. Male nurses were expected to do the same as females. We worked on female wards, in midwifery and gynaecology. This was not always easy as it meant pioneering some

change in attitudes amongst patients, families and other professionals. However with the support of colleagues, we brought about a change in local culture and of course these days, male nurses are commonly accepted as an integral and equal part of the health care team in most developed countries. The notion of males working in nursing, while well developed in some countries, has faltered in others. For example in some Asian countries, nurses are not rostered to female wards yet their international registration requires they have experience in working with females.

The 70's were also a time of industrial restlessness as trade unions were very active and there were several strikes over wage increases and an increase in the professional status of nursing occurred. Nurses were quite militant and actively shaking off the shackles of a system which was military in its discipline and apprenticeship like in its teaching and learning.

In the 80's, the Australian government decided to move all nursing from hospital schools into tertiary institutions and I decided that I would focus on becoming a nurse educator, a move which meant systematically obtaining Bachelor, Master and PhD degrees and entering the university system as an experienced teacher but a very inexperienced researcher and administrator. This occurred because of the rapid growth of university nursing schools and the congruent demand for nurse academics. We were novice academics and had to learn quickly, but over the last 15 years, nursing research has developed well and is becoming an integral component of the profession underpinning education and practice.

I am not sure if I would have done the same had I worked in nursing in another culture, but I do feel

that the Australian culture that has influenced my development, has been one of equality and being offered a 'fair go'; in a culture of empowering professions previously heavily dominated by other professions or genders; and supported by an enlightened government at the time who believed in the professional development of nurses.

These cultural influences I have carried with me and they have influenced my practice and work as an academic in several different cultures. Now I have the opportunity to work in a nursing school in Singapore which has the potential to provide regional leadership and develop an international reputation. To do this, we need to be: confident, yet humbly aware of other cultures and their nursing cultures; innovative yet patient and a believer in time and consistency building credibility; open and democratic in leadership style; empathic and encouraging of colleagues who are disadvantaged by culture, economics or politics;

and believers in traditional scholarship and related ethical behaviour.

Having had a full and exciting career in nursing, here I am in Singapore as Head and Professor of the Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies, of one of the most promising schools of nursing in the region. With a generous donation from the Lee Foundation, the school had its first intake for the BSc (Nursing) of 50 students in 2006. I am part of a profession of which I am proud and look forward to serving for some years yet. After a career choice which myself or my family never considered, I have been carried along on a wave of change and development in nursing and have been fortunate enough to have kept up to date with qualifications and experience and now am proud to say I am looking forward to the challenge of making the Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies a regional leader in nursing education, research and clinical innovation, with an enviable international reputation.

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