

EDITORIAL

Nurses Have to Have an Impact: We Can Do it

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It was with great pleasure and interest that I visited Lithuania last year and met with the representatives of the Lithuanian Nurses Association and the Minister of Health.

There is no doubt that Lithuania has gone through significant development since its independence, and huge progress has been made in the fields of nursing practice and education. Today, the Lithuanian Nurses Association is a strong association representing nurses at all levels, and I was delighted to see that strong ties have been forged between the Lithuanian Nurses Association and the Ministry of Health.

While I am delighted with the progress nursing is making in Europe, I am concerned that no country is left behind and that progress is consistent across the continent. The International Council of Nurses is working closely with the European Federation of Nurses Associations and the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe to improve healthcare systems throughout Europe and to ensure that nurses play a leading role in the future of healthcare. In particular, the work of the European Forum of National Nursing and Midwifery Associations, which serves as a link between international and national policy-makers and the nurses and midwives in the WHO European Region, is to be congratulated.

But there is still much to be done. The International Council of Nurses and WHO Euro must continue to partner in order to advance nursing contribution to Health 2020, the new European health policy framework adopted in 2012. Health 2020 aims to support action across the government and the society to “significantly improve the health and well-being of populations, reduce health inequalities, strengthen public health and ensure people-centered health systems that are universal, equitable, sustainable, and of high quality” (1).

In addition, we must continue to encourage nurses to get involved with governments and policy making. Nurses must communicate to governments the need for sound nursing sensitive data systems

that provide effective surveillance of nursing activities and their related impacts. We must also convince governments of the value of nursing advice so that it is systematically sought to inform health care planning and reform at all levels. Nurses are the key source of information and expertise on the services and the service mechanisms they manage and deliver. Moreover, being on the frontline, nurses can provide valuable perspectives on the population health needs of the communities they work with and within. It must be articulated to governments that much of this information is uniquely understood by nurses and its inclusion is vital to good policy development and decision-making. Failure by governments to seek advice from the predominant health professional group would result in a failure to adequately scope and examine health policy options.

Unfortunately within the WHO itself, there is a severe lack of nurses in leadership positions. Data from the WHO human resources annual report of January 2013 show that nursing specialists account for only 0.6% of staff in professional and higher categories when compared to medical specialists who represent 90.7%. Even dietitians and nutritionists (at 2.6%) and pharmacists (at 2.0%) have greater representation than nurses.

The situation has deteriorated over the past 40 years. In 1968, there were more than 200 nurses working for the WHO, and the representation of nursing specialists was 2.9% in 2001. Since May 2010, the position of Chief Scientist, Nursing, and Midwifery has been vacant.

The International Council of Nurses has highlighted the fact that the number of nurses in permanent policy making positions within the WHO is inadequate particularly given that universal health coverage is the internationally agreed goal of health and development policy. We have raised this issue at the World Health Assembly and written directly to the WHO Director General, Margaret Chan. We will continue this work to ensure that nursing is adequately represented and encourage nursing associations to do the same.

Reference

1. World Health Organization. About Health 2020. Available from: URL: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-policy/health-2020-the-european-policy-for-health-and-well-being/about-health-2020>