

Nurses and the Society

Much has been said about the role of nurses in society in the recent past. It is one of the burning problems of the nursing profession to get recognition for its unique contribution in the health care delivery system at each level. But, nobody has ever attempted to go deep into the causes which are responsible for a rough deal for nurses by the society, argues K.C. AGGARWAL.

It has to be kept in mind that nurse is a part of the society and works with the society for a specific function. Recognition by the society to a particular professional group depends not only on its contribution in a particular aspect of life of the community but in a wider socio-economic and cultural context. A society where male members are given more prestige and honour due to historical and social factors, a profession dominated by women, can hardly get equal respect in the eyes of the society, however unique its contributions may be.

It is also to be kept in mind that prestige and recognition to a particular professional group are in proportion to its coverage and the extent of the usefulness of its work. Therefore, it is strange to note that the nursing profession, which has remained indifferent to the nursing care needs of 80 per cent of the community in the country, becomes conscious of its privileges community should grant without giving the least thinking to the practical plans to meet its obligations to the society. The question is not what image nursing profession commands but a situation of no image of nurses simply because 80 per cent of the community have never heard, seen and benefited from the services of this elite-based service.

Thus, there is a challenge of immense possibilities and difficulties. The image of the nurse in the community will depend to the extent such challenges are met successfully by the nurses with an open mind in a give and take relationship. It will also depend on the extent to which nursing profession can re-adjust and reshape itself according to the changing realities in the socio-economic fields.

The Society

Society is defined as an organization of member agents. The outstanding feature of society is a 'System', a system of social relationship between individuals. The importance of society lies in the fact that it controls and regulates the behaviour of its members, both by custom and law. It can exert pressure on its members to conform to its norms. In short, society is a vast network of relationships and compulsions that propel, direct and constrain man's individual efforts. Society

is dynamic. Health is influenced by the society's mode of living and public health acts as an agent of social change.

Society recognizes its members in accordance with its norms and customs, and to the extent its members conform to its rules of behaviour and norms. The questions which may be asked here are: To what extent have nurses been useful to the society? To what degree have nurses conformed to society's rules and regulations? What made us keep a social distance between ourselves and the masses?

A nurse is an individual, a citizen and a professional. An individual, to be an effective member of the society should be a contributory and useful member for most of its fellow members. An individual should also obey society's rules and regulations and should feel a part and parcel of the community. Such an individual can demand and command his or her respectful place in the society.

To what extent nurses, as individuals, have been effective in the society? Did we not allow ourselves to shut within the four wall the hospitals? To what extent did we conform to the norms and taboos of the society in various aspects of our life? To what extent our contributions have benefited the society? I believe the answers are not in our favour. Hence we cannot blame the society for not giving recognition to us.

A citizen is one who knows her/his duties and responsibilities and participates in the democratic processes of the country and contributes to its socio-economic development and cultural enrichment. A citizen who discharges his/her duties can legitimately command his rights. In this respect also nurses have kept themselves aloof. As citizens also we have failed to discharge our duties and responsibilities.

A professional is one who has sufficient knowledge and skills in her/his field of endeavour, renders useful and safe services to the community based on rational and scientific decisions, observes some degree of professional nobility, professional ethics and feels proud of his/her profession. A professional also changes with the social change and if social change is necessary, initiates social change through his/her actions. Here, again, we may pose certain questions to analyze as to what extent we, as nurses, can be called members of a profession. Do we have sufficient knowledge and skills in our profession? Do our services reach the people who need them most? Do we feel proud of our profession? Do we expose ourselves as nurses in the community? Do we observe our code of ethics? Do we initiate change? And, finally: Do we bring about changes in our practice, according to the changes in the society, its needs and aspirations?

The answers to above questions are again negative. Therefore, it is but natural that a professional, who is failing in his or her professional requirements, will also fail to command a proper place in the society.

Relationships between individual members and groups in the society are on the basis of give and take. A nurse should meet a social need and society should recognize his or her contribution. The Nurse is in a position by virtue of his or her social nearness to the families and communities at large to motivate and

initiate social change. Community nursing is not merely visiting families and conducting clinics and such activities. Real and worthwhile community nursing should initiate political and social action in the people to improve their own health. All this can be done when we know the society we serve. Moreover, a very pertinent question we should pose ourselves is: have we ever thought of providing such services to the community? Do we ever try to understand the community we serve? Finally, do we have the necessary social and mental attitude to serve the toiling masses? Is it realistic to expect for us a better image from the society whom we have neglected for such a long time.

Obligations of Society

It is the duty of the society to provide certain privileges to its members such as security, source of livelihood, facilities for growth and development and necessary rewards and punishments as need be. To a great extent society is meeting its obligations to nurses. It is providing all the facilities for growth and their development, security, and a source of livelihood commensurate with their contribution to the welfare of the society. Here lies the point that since we are failing in our responsibilities to the society, we are given a place in the society in proportion to our usefulness in practical terms to the society. It is said that nurses render unique services to the society and commensurate privileges are not granted to them. Granted that our services are indispensable to the society, but we have to be clear as to which society we are talking of. Let us realize that you do whatever you can, you can never develop sympathy in the minds of urban elites whom so far we have served.

There are certain historical reasons for society not granting to nurses a respectful place. These can be outlined as follows:

1. For cultural reasons our society gives more respect to male members. Hence a profession, dominated by men, gets more recognition.

2. Culturally, society imposes certain restrictions on women to participate in the activities outside home. Therefore, for women, who take to nursing, there is a conflict between the norms of the society and their job requirements. Again, there is a conflict between their ascribed and achieved roles.

3. Nursing has its origin in certain menial types of activities, which are considered low by the society.

4. In the beginning, professionals in nursing came from low class families. Therefore, though the end has changed, yet the perceptions of the society have not changed: *Firstly*, because they have met nurses only in the hospitals where the social distance between nursing personnel and community is deliberately maintained. *Secondly*, they are not benefited much in form and function from the so called specialized nurses.

5. Due to historical reasons, nursing profession is dominated by some sections of the community; therefore, all the prejudices, however irrational they may be, for other sections of the community.

6. Society gives status to its members on various counts of which economic gain is an important factor.

Since nurses are paid less and do more difficult jobs, hence they have a low status.

7. Nurses confine themselves within the four walls of the hospital. Therefore, the message of nursing and nurses has hardly reached the masses, again resulting in a low image.

8. Nurses have always obeyed the doctors (in a dependent role), therefore, it is but natural that credit always goes to the doctors. There are also certain historical factors responsible for the submissiveness of nurses:

- i) By culture, girls are brought up in the family to be submissive.

- ii) Because, in the past, missionaries took to nursing, for whom to lead a life of poverty was a motto they tended to get satisfied with whatever little reward it offered: by religion, it was prohibited to demand the price for their services.

- iii) Girls were thought to be a liability.

- iv) Lack of educational facilities for girls.

- v) Dominance of men in the society.

Therefore, a profession, predominantly of women, can hardly claim equal status with the opposite sex.

Self Image

Image of an individual in the society is the sum total of his/her own image about his/her, self, perceptions of the society about its usefulness and the extent to which he/she meets a social need. The pertinent question which may be addressed to ourselves is:

—Do we have a good image of ourselves?

—Do we feel that we are members of an honoured profession?

—Do we feel happy, when we are addressed as a 'Nurse'?

—Do we expose ourselves as nurses in the community?

—Do we have expertise in our own job?

We do not have positive answers to these questions, because:

—We are brought up and educated in the community in which we do not have much respect.

—Our profession has not achieved a position of respect among learned professions.

—Still the image of women as a contributory member of the society is not very bright in the eyes of millions of our countrymen.

Why do we feel that society is not having a good image of nurses? Is it because our working conditions are not good? Is it because our profession is not recognized among learned professions? Or, is it because other health team members look down upon us?

The fact is that no amount of recognition, monetary reward or image can pay back the value of nursing services offered by nurses to the society. But,

unfortunately, we confined our services to the hard hearted sections of the society. Women themselves do not have a good image of this women-dominated profession. Let us remember that millions of uneducated but rational ruralites may be having a high respect for nurses. But, unfortunately, we have failed to teach them to a great extent and so also their voices are not heard. You can never arouse sympathy in the minds of administrators and intelligentsia in the community. Let us not worry about our privileges, though they are essential, and meet a felt social need of the masses.

Nurses are their own enemy. Therefore, why to blame the society. A profession which is full of jealousies is doomed to lose its respectable place in the society. In this aspect certain pertinent questions can be asked :

1. Do we have a sense of professionalism ?
2. Do we provide opportunities and facilities within our power, to junior staff members for professional advancement ?
3. To what extent do we co-operate with each other ?
4. Are we interested in our own professional organization, which has been a source of inspiration to the profession ?
5. Does our behaviour in the community conform to the norms set forth by the society ?

Let us remember that a profession, in which there is no harmony and lots of internal tensions can hardly devote itself to the welfare of the society. A profession where majority of the nurses are dictated by a handful of western-oriented and educated nurses can hardly evoke a sense of self-respect among the rank and file.

The worth of a profession to a great extent depends on the quality and the quantity of its professionals. In nursing, we have given little attention as far as quality of professionals is concerned. There are varied reasons for it, but there is a lot of scope for improvement such as in selections of professionals, inculcation of a sense of responsibility and a forward looking attitude in the professionals. We are quite sure that the present system cannot do this job. It has to be re-structured. Administrators are to be given refresher courses to make them sensitive to the needs of the community.

Remedy

The only way to gain a respectful place in the society is to devote ourselves to the following set of programmatic formulations :

1. Health care needs of the rural masses should be effectively met.
2. A system of education which makes the professionals sensitive to the health care needs of the country.
3. Keeping our knowledge and skills up-to-date.
4. Minimizing conflicts and jealousies among ourselves.

5. Taking interest in the activities of the professional organization.

6. Devising ways and means for solving our professional problems.

7. Participating in the health team as an effective member.

8. Entry of proper individuals in this profession.

9. Incentives for men to enter this profession.

10. Inculcating in the professionals a sense of responsibility.

11. Improving public relations in all fields.

We believe if the abovementioned preconditions are achieved, the message of nursing and nurses will reach the so far neglected masses. Nurses will also contribute in the total socio-economic development of the country by rendering comprehensive health services to all without any discrimination but biased in favour of rural and downtrodden and vulnerable sections of the society. If this happens, the question of the image of nurses in the community will become irrelevant as nurses will become an instrument of social change and overall development of the society.

PHILADELPHIA HOSPITAL, AMBALA CITY

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