

THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

By

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HISTORICALLY practitioners of a profession have always tended to band together in societies and associations for the purposes of discussion, support and mutual action for the improvement of their art.

Steadily throughout the past century, by public acclaim and by the efforts of practitioners, nursing has become a profession in modern society. Compared to theology, law and medicine, it is a new satellite in the galaxy of professions but compared to the meteoric emergence of the many professions born of modern technology, it is old, very old.

Contemplation on the role of the professional association requires some review of the nature and characteristics of a professional association. In what way does it differ from other associations?

In their first appraisal in 1945 and again in their re-appraisal in 1959 the Bixler's indicated the progression of nursing towards professional status. Though the literature on the characteristics of a profession have been, and continue to be widely discussed by sociologists and other analysts of human and social behaviour, those who have been involved in studies of nursing have favoured the criteria originally applied by the Bixlers or variations of them namely:—

1. A profession utilizes in its practice a well-defined and well-organized body of specialized knowledge which is on the intellectual level of the higher learning.
2. A profession constantly enlarges the body of knowledge it uses and improves its techniques of education and service by the use of the scientific method.
3. A profession entrusts the education of its practitioners to institutions of higher education.
4. A profession applies its body of knowledge in practical services which are vital to human and social welfare.
5. A profession functions autonomously in the formulation of professional policy and in the control of professional activity thereby.
6. A profession attracts individuals of intellectual and personal qualities who exalt service above personal gain and who recognize their chosen occupation as a life work.
7. A profession strives to compensate its practitioners by providing freedom of action, opportunity for continuous professional growth, and economic security.

All definitions have been challenged. The definition of "professional Employee" in the Taft Hartley

Act of 1947 (United States of America), was intended to define only those who were strictly professional, but subsequent interpretations have been not permitted the clear-cut distinction originally intended.

Nevertheless the principles of nursing practice enunciated by the great teachers of this century have been founded on the independent exercise of judgement in the nursing care of patients as distinct from the medical care.

Strangely, the uncertainties about the nature of a profession have not precluded persistent efforts towards identifying nursing as a profession. Much greater difficulties have perplexed nursing leaders in defining nursing.

Functions of Nursing Associations

Possessed of the conviction that nursing has a unique and independent contribution to make to society, nursing associations have emerged at local, national and international levels. Each level of organization, avoiding duplication, seeks to supplement the others by extending the sphere of influence of the profession. Each of the 74 countries in membership with International Council of Nurses has a written constitution and regulations declaring its commitment to the improvement of standards for education and practice. While there are marked differences in the systems by which practitioners may be prepared, licensed, and influenced or controlled by the profession each association has endorsed the objective of ICN to "share their common interest working together to develop the contribution of nursing to the promotion of the health of people and the care of the sick." As stated in the Foreword to its constitution and regulations "The ICN, which is a federation of national nurses' associations, brings them together so that in sharing the contributions of each, nursing practice throughout the world is strengthened and improved."

The profession is identified within society locally, nationally, and internationally by what its association does and how it does it.

Today professional associations are involved in a plethora of activities stemming from the multiple internal and external expectations of individual members, the profession and society.

The professional association is supportive to individual practitioners by providing a social identifica-

tion and the security of group promotion and protection. While some association activities are functionally relative to the profession as a whole there are some that are primarily individual. For the profession collectively the foremost obligation of the association is to advance standards of competency.

The professional association is a cohesive instrument through which unity of action may be demonstrated in relationships with other professions, educational institutions, community agencies and governments.

All Association functions must be considered in terms of relativity to the quality of performance of the individual practitioner. The eternal question must be "what will be the effect on the quality of nursing care?" and the eternal thrust of the association must be towards improved competence in the delivery of nursing care.

All efforts for the edification and welfare of the individual members, or the profession, or society at large, ultimately have some impact on all three.

Definition of Nursing

Five years ago Virginia Henderson, noted nursing educator, author, researcher and lecturer, presented in the American Journal of Nursing her concept of the essential function in nursing and the implications of that concept for nursing practice, research and education. It was a re-affirmation of the definition originally proposed in "ICN Basic Principles of Nursing Care" published five years earlier and subsequently reprinted in sixteen languages.

Professional Standards

The focus of all professional standards is the improvement of practice. The improvement of practice is a task that must be approached from all angles simultaneously through standards of selection, preparation and performance of practitioners—all three are inter-dependent.

The most difficult of professional standards are those pertaining to competence to practice. Competency nurtures public trust. Society trusts its specialists to make and carry out decisions which require expertness. The more expertise required to perform a service, the more society must have confidence in those performing it. A profession is held responsible for the quality of service it renders. The founder of the International Council of Nurses, Mrs. Bedford Fenwick, advocated in 1901 that "It is the duty of the nursing profession of every country to work for suitable legislative enactment, regulating the education of nurses and protection of the interests of the public by securing state examination and public registration with the proper penalties for not enforcing the same."

Nursing associations (national, provincial, state, etc.) are committed to directing their energies towards

those means by which the competence of practitioners may be assured namely :

- * supporting quality programmes for the preparation of practitioners and the selection of talented persons for those programmes ;
- * seeking desirable changes in legislation, for the repeal of ineffective legislation and for the enactment of that which is necessary for improved standards of nursing practice ;
- * promoting continuing education to fortify and safeguard the quality of practice ;
- * developing and presenting an informed articulate voice to effect change ;
- * establishing better communication with colleagues in other professions and with the consumers of health services.

Whether or not the profession is responsible for recommending candidates for licensure, the professional association must exercise its influence and expertise in assuring that institutions providing preparatory programmes are held accountable for the competence of the graduates they produce and recommend for licensure. Some process of accreditation of preparatory programmes is necessary for the protection of the student-practitioner, the integrity of the profession and the safety of the public. A professional association is obligated to vigilance in formulating policies for legislative enactment and has an equal obligation for vigilance in monitoring existing and proposed legislation bearing on the work and goals of the profession.

However, the enforcement of high standards of preparation and the requirements of minimum competence for practice will not ensure a continuity in high quality of performance. Human nature being what it is there will always be those whose competence will deteriorate by carelessness in techniques, by discontinuance of learning, by rejection of responsibility or by unethical behaviour. The profession through its association must enforce or demand that the licensing authority forcefully discipline members who do not meet acceptable standards of practice.

Continuing Education

A profession that guarantees the competence of its members to the public is committed to perpetual concern for standards of performance and ethical behaviour. That a nurse has been adequately prepared and licensed does not ensure that some years later she is performing competently.

The pace and content of new knowledge demand the profession to give priority concern to the continuing edification of practitioners. The rapid accumulation of new knowledge, the increasing complexity of nursing responsibilities, the changes in health care concepts and therapies impose on nurses the need for a continuing process of education. For continuing practice it is necessary to keep skills and competencies current with the growth of knowledge. "This imposes obligations upon both the nursing practitioner and the nursing profession ; upon the practitioner, to continue to increase and enrich the knowledge on

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