The Professional Nursing Association and You!

(Excerpts)

by Miss Alice Girard, M.A.

The presence of so many nurses from so many areas of the world, here in Melbourne today, is, first of all, an impressive human spectacle and secondly, a pleasing experience.

We represent professional nurses from all parts of the world. We work under every existing condition—political, economic, geographical and climatic. We are deeply integrated into the fabric of our countries and these countries vary in terms of national aspirations. Notwithstanding the possibilities of division inherent in the variety of backgrounds that make up our profession, we are all united in a common purpose and a common goal. In this unanimity of purpose we are indeed fortunate since, in a world full of conflict, it provides a broad international basis for mutual effort, interest and understanding.

Unity of purpose and common goals have little meaning without a constant and conscientious effort to achieve them. Nor do these goals themselves remain stationary. In all societies of the world they are constantly subject to movement and change, just as constantly the purpose, methods, and means of nursing action within changing societies need to be reappraised and directed. The members of the nursing profession must stand asidewith indifference, from the forces which are constantly bringing about change in the world. We are part of them. To fulfill our purpose in life it is necessary to know them and understand them.

I will not attempt to document here the various forces which are clearly at work in the world today. Mention of just a few of them will be enough for this discussion. Around us, in every country, we can observe:

A striving for education. The rising level of education among the people of the world, together with the development of mass communication media which function in many instances with the speed of light, have resulted in new and changing concepts of human rights, human well-being and human behaviour.

Coinciding with rising levels of education has been a veritable revolution in science and technology, which has profoundly affected medicine and nursing.

The wider horizons opened by educational and scientific advances have been accompanied by increasing anxieties among the people of the world, anxieties which may be of mental or economic origin.

It is in a world constantly changed by such forces that the nurse must work. To be true to her profession she must work effectively. To be true to our trust, its responsible members of an association of nurses, we must help her to do so.

To understand the value of any association for the individual or the value of the individual to the association, let us make an analogy of the structure of organized nursing at its various levels with that of the human body, considering the nurse as the primary unit in this structure, that is, the cell.

Anatomy has taught us that human cells have different functions to perform and that, in order to play their roles in the structure of the human body, cells which are similarly specialized aggregate into units of various orders, constituting the tissues and the organs that are grouped together into systems. Each cell must contribute its essential part to the tissue to which it belongs, because the organization of the body is dependent on the need for each part, no matter how small, to contribute its share and to work for the good of the whole. Through the study of physiology we are further impressed with the remarkable correlation of the functions of various organs and with the compensatory mechanisms set into operation by changes in the environment, all of which have but one object: to keep the body in a steady state regardless of the changes which take place internally and externally.

Is this not also the immediate end or goal of an association? To bring together each unit or individual to take its place in the structure and, to contribute to this structure the strength which will help it weather the winds, and keep it steady even though this structure may be, and indeed will be, if it is at all progressive, in a constant state of change.

Like the human organism which is adapted both physiologically and psychologically to change, the structure of a professional association must also have its stabilizers to enable it to keep an even keel while each unit is constantly being transformed by social forces which affect its role as well as its functions. Lewis Mumford, the American sociologist, has stated that:

"...The very extension of the range of community in our time, through national and world-wide organizations, only increases the need for building up as never before the intimate cells, the basic tissues of social life; the family and the home, the neighbourhood, the working group and the city."

Nursing has been influenced more than any other profession by the extraordinarily rapid rate of

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social and cultural changes which have threatened its identity and relationships. Therefore it must find stability and strength in its associations based on unity of purpose and goals, and in mutual responsibility. An association can give unity and direction to these strengths and aspirations; it cannot provide the strength itself, for only individuals can do that.

The purpose can be found in the civil law definition of an association as a convention by which two or more persons pool together, in a permanent way, their knowledge or their activity for a purpose other than sharing a pecuniary gain. This implies as a characteristic feature, the communication of views, and of ideals among members; it also implies an agreement of purposes and consequently it is in the nature of a contract. It means a willingness on the part of each member to be bound to the others as means of reaching the objective for which the association exists.

Common activities tend to create among members a spirit of loyalty and solidarity, and a sense of unity which could be called vocational consciousness. As the association reaches a greater number of members it also implies power, scope and influence. Belonging to a professional association is a privilege. It means belonging to a selected group who are duty-bound to consider collective benefit rather than individual achievements; it means taking pride in serving a calling which is recognised as being bigger than oneself and more significant in the life of the community.

Professional nursing associations have a vital role to play in the community. With the rising levels of education in all countries, there has come a rising general belief in self-determination in government by the consent of the governed. This means that, to be effective, an association must be effective through people, that is, by obtaining their understanding and consent. This principle, which leads to the most satisfactory human relations, is the one which should govern our public relations.

Understanding and acceptance from the community in which she works will be available to the individual nurse—and hence to her entire profession—if the community finds it has satisfactory answers to these questions:

How are nurses dealing with the growing demands made upon the profession?

Are they striving to meet these demands?

Are they keeping pace with the advances made in other professions?

Do they plan for constant re-evaluation of their methods and goals?

If the final and deepest obligation of the nursing profession is to the patients entrusted to its care, it will fulfill this obligation in the measure in which it recognizes its responsibility to the community. Safeguarding and improving the vitality of our human resources should be our prime objective, and the failure in some areas to keep up an adequate supply of professional nurses has already made the nursing profession deficient in the public’s eye.

If the nursing profession has responsibilities toward the community—and we have seen that it has—it is no less true that it also has responsibility to its own members. To be more specific, we shall consider National Nurses’ Associations and their responsibilities.

Dr. Allan Gregg, Vice-President of the Rockefeller Foundation, feels that the avowed purpose of a national association may be to serve its constituent members by reconciling internal differences, protecting collective interests and providing a forum to express the consensus of its members’ views. The raison d’être and common justification, and the essential vitality of national association, should be derived from the fact that in a democratic society, the citizens can exercise individually and by association the eternal vigilance that is the price of liberty. They do not have to leave what interests them to the experts or to a government bureaucracy. They do it themselves. In essence, Dr. Gregg says a national association disputes the finality of any control from above downward.

Whatever its structure or mode of operation, a national nurses’ association should be directly or indirectly concerned with setting and maintaining high standards of professional education, practice and research; seeking economic security for its members; creating for them an image of what nursing should be, and interpreting how it is trying to set conditions for this image to become a reality.

Fundamentally, we are all sure that what we want is to give basically sound and intelligently-administered nursing care and service to all people who need them, whether they are aware of this need or not. Yet our ordinary member who is willing and happy to be by the bedside giving this care, feels that she often finds herself either pushed aside from her satisfying task to leave it to some other non-professional worker, or pushed upward to direct others to do the tasks which she herself would prefer to do. She may then feel that for this latter role she needs more or better preparation which she proceeds to get by formal courses or study, from which she often returns, not better equipped for the specific tasks of helping these other persons, but with a broader education that has often taken her into many fields of knowledge outside of nursing. The assumption is that this will make her a better nurse.

“One of the dilemmas of Nursing is that the further one progresses in the profession, the further one moves from the patient.” This unfortunately is also the general impression of the medical profession and the public.

The professional association has a responsibility to look ahead, to recognise the changing scope of the profession, to search out new functions that it should assume. Should it not also preserve old standards?
and practices of proven worth while incorporating new standards and practices of emerging worth?

Because of the general concern of nursing educators with professional education, attention has been focussed on such factors as the change in skills, techniques and practices to keep up with the advances in medical, social, physical and natural sciences. Firstly, let us remember that we are educated nurses for service. We no longer believe that this service depends solely on technical skills. Esther Lucille Brown in "Nursing for the Future" mentioned in this way more than 10 years ago: "Nursing is sometimes so broad in scope and profound in nature that technical competence is only one of its components. Technical competence alone would not supply that discriminative judgment, that alert self-direction, that skill in directing work and action on the basis of an understanding of human behavior and human relationships. It is these values that raise nursing from the level of a craft to that of a profession, that distinguishes the professional nurse from the person whose almost exclusive preoccupation is with the prescribed physical care of a sick person."

The role of the nurse in society, as well as her economic security, will depend largely on the image she created for herself in the public's mind.

She is a dedicated member of society, at the same time, the society in which she works today is one with local, regional and national aspirations. In most parts of the world, particularly those where democracy in its many phases is practised or sought, national aspirations will have two particular aspects: the desire and hope for a rising standard of living and the strong likelihood of trouble if this hope is denied. These two factors, again, spring from the social forces at work throughout the world.

As a member of society, the nurse has every reason and every right to be concerned with these hopes and possibilities, as they apply to her and to her profession. There is, in the nurse, a high content of dedication to her calling--and this is as it should be. There is also, in the nurse, a high content of human nature which demands certain levels of human comforts. This is as it will be. It is neither reasonable nor realistic to assume that the aspirations of the nurse are separable from those of her society which expects a higher standard of living. Should this be denied, there can be only one result--fewer nurses will enter the profession. Under the immutable laws of work division this can lead only to diminishing nursing service, a denial of the goals of nursing.

The professional association can and should be concerned with the economic as well as the physical well-being of the nurse. In providing guidance in this area it is necessary to understand clearly the conditions between what is desirable and what is possible. It is necessary also to understand that a service profession, such as nursing, can obtain economic security only with the approval and acceptance of the society in which it works.

There are, within the profession of nursing, two basic questions which will have to be asked by each generation of nurses: are there enough nurses? Are the services they provide good enough? Neither of these questions can be answered on the basis of economics alone. But, with equal emphasis, I suggest that the answers cannot be divorced entirely from economics.

The term "economics" here is used to mean the welfare of the nurse. This includes all those things to which every human being aspires--opportunity for higher standards of living; opportunity for advancement; recognition of the usefulness of the work done; good working conditions; reasonable hours of work; opportunities and machinery for redress of misunderstandings; security of employment; security of comforts of life after the years of employment have passed. If all these things are inherent, in some measure, in the aspirations of every society, their fulfillment depends on the ability--and not desire--of the society to meet them. Can we continue to attract and qualify new members of the profession without fulfilling these aspirations? Can they be fulfilled without the full understanding and acceptance of society? The answer is "no". It is equally apparent that the individual nurse cannot alone deal with these conditions. It becomes the function of the professional associations to do so--and this can be done only by creating and maintaining an atmosphere in which society permits this to be done. I would like to pause here to pay tribute to the International Council of Nurses' executive for their vigilance in this matter. They have been wise in realizing the value in working with the International Labour Organization in order to give leadership to national nursing associations in this important subject, and on creating to this effect a division of nursing economics.

There is another aspect in the responsibilities of the nursing profession which I have not yet mentioned and this is research. Not knowing whether Dr. Jahoda would agree that we have enough of the necessary qualifications, I have taken the liberty of casting away the doubts that were in my own mind, to assume that nursing is a profession. The immediate question that follows this statement is: do we have a professional approach in our methods of solving our problems and in planning for the future growing and developing of the profession?

Being a professional involves more than status. It involves responsibility. It commits the profession to the unending task of increasing the knowledge it applies to its professional activities. It commits the members of the profession to a willingness to be critical of their existing knowledge and practice. It suggests the capacity for self-criticism by which an informed group can re-direct its thinking, enlarge its knowledge,
and compel the profession to a never-ending programme of improving its performance.

Improved performance starts with education. That phase of education which is climaxied by graduation ceremony is but a preliminary phase. Education is a life-long process and the insight and ability to use the educational opportunities available in day-to-day work is what distinguishes the professional.

It is the changing nature of nursing service which is demanding more and more of nursing education. This change in nursing service includes many functions which were not expected of the nurse a decade ago. It requires the capacity to plan and to plan well. It requires the ability to deal with the mental as well as the physical aspects of the patient and his family.

These concepts of service and education cannot be separated from research. Indeed, membership in a profession of any kind implies a responsibility for research. How else could we keep pace with the revolution in science and technology going on around us if we could not, through research, roll back the frontiers of present knowledge?

Dr. Lester Evans, in an address given at Louisiana University Centennial, states: "The skills, techniques and practices of your occupations will inevitably change with the advancement of knowledge but the fundamental nature and behavior of the people with whom you live and work, will not. There is greater need now than ever before for men who understand men and the works of men. Progress is being made in the social and behavioral sciences and the humanities and the arts, but the momentum and range of inquiry is not so great. Yet it is in this area that more must be known if man is to deal adequately with the circumstances of his life. The educated man must be master of his technology, not subservient to it."

It is unfortunate, perhaps, that mention of research evokes images of lavishly equipped laboratories and highly-specialised scientists. This, it is true, is one aspect of research that has led to vast advances in knowledge. But there is another aspect, one in which we all can and should participate, and one which has led in the past and will lead in the future to new developments. The equipment required in this phase of research is available to all of us. It is simply the enquiring mind. Without objective curiosity, without the enquiring mind, the most elaborately equipped and brilliantly staffed laboratory will accomplish little.

Nurses all over the world have the opportunity to train their minds to enquire—and when they do, new information and new insight into the field of nursing will be the results. In this, as in other areas of nursing, every nurse can contribute and help to enlighten and enrich her profession.

To sum up: The functions of professional associations are to inform, guide and stimulate individual members as well as organizations, in initiating sound thinking as well as critical judgement in the formulation of plans, policies and programmes which will affect the future of nursing.

In this task the National Nursing Associations are fortunate in that they do not stand alone, but are aligned together as one strong chain which encircles the globe. This chain is the International Council of Nurses from which national associations expect guidance and wisdom.

Through its constant contacts with member associations it is expected to gather information on new theories, new developments and new avenues of service, to evaluate and to disseminate information which can benefit all. It is expected to give special professional assistance to those member associations who are still struggling with the growing pains that accompany the development of all young organizations, and particularly those working under adverse conditions.

It is expected because of its choice position as the centre in the world of nursing, to look beyond the horizon and visualize on a broad scale how the profession can improve its service to humanity.

This is a job which transcends all boundaries, all politics, all faiths, and language is no barrier because nurses all over the world speak one common language which Miss Bridges has called: professional integrity, and profess one religion in common which is to do good.

It is also expected of the International Council of Nurses that it will use its prestige as the first international association for professional women, to see that nursing is represented in all world organizations where the rights and the interests of nurses are concerned, as well as where the profession can contribute to the welfare of mankind.

Let us remember also that information knows no boundaries and that information is the basis of wisdom, and that if the International Council of Nurses is helpless without the support of its members, it is also useless unless, in turn, gives help and support. It is important that this interdependent need should create the kind of human relationships which foster peace and good-will. Miss Nightingale no doubt had this in mind when she said: "Professions like nations can only flourish through an individual sense of corporate responsibility," and Douglas Mallock conveys in a few words the essence of what our relationships should be in a poem entitled "Builders All."

Someone has blended the plaster
And someone has carried the stone.
Neither the man nor the master
Ever has builded alone.
Only by working together
Things are accomplished by man.
All have a share in the beauty
All have a part in the plan.