

From the Editor-in-Chief

Imagine a World without Nurses – Understanding Our Value and Worth and Upholding the Standards of Our Profession

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“Imagine a world without nurses. Think of a world without persons who know what nurses know; who believe as nurses believe; who do what nurses do; who have the effect nurses have on the health of individuals, families, and the nation; who enjoy the trust that nurses enjoy” (Styles, 2003).



Gretta Styles, nurse leader extraordinaire, offered this image in a presentation to the American Nurses Association House of Delegates almost 20 years ago in 2003 when the country faced the last major nursing shortage. That shortage was due largely to the expanding opportunities for women and for experienced nurses. It turns out that if you can do

the work of a nurse, you have the knowledge, skills, and expertise to do many other jobs outside of a hospital and even outside of health care.

Today, we are facing a different type of nursing shortage. When the pandemic began in hot spots across the country, geographic shortages appeared, and nurses travelled to help plug the holes. It didn’t take long for the competition spurred by the demand for nurses to result in health care organizations increasing compensation and incentives. Over the course of the pandemic, nurses have discovered their value – not just what we can offer an organization, but also what we are worth.

The Nursing Shortage Will Not End When the Pandemic Ends

This nursing shortage will not end when the pandemic ends. The retirement of Baby Boomer (BB) nurses, who until recently made up the majority of the nursing profession, began before the pandemic, but it has escalated dramatically over the last year. And it is not just the number of BB nurses who are retiring; it is also about the knowledge and experience that leave with them. Buerhaus and colleagues (2017) estimate the nursing workforce “will lose more than 2 million years of nursing experience each year between 2020-2030 as the remaining estimated 640,000 BB RNs retire” (p. 248). In addition, RNs are advancing their education and moving out of staff nurse positions. There are now over 325,000 nurse practitioners in the United States, over 10% of whom graduated in 2019-2020 (American Association of Nurse Practitioners, 2021).

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Schools of nursing are reporting increased enrollment in all areas of advanced practice nursing at both the master’s and doctoral levels. Job opportunities for experienced nurses continue to expand inside and outside of hospitals. As an example, the 2021 Future of Nursing report describes many roles for nursing in communities as we mount a national effort to improve access to health care and health equity.

Caring for Ourselves While We Care for Others

A byproduct of the nursing shortage created by the pandemic is the current heightened awareness others have of the value and worth of nurses. Recruitment and retention of nurses is on almost every executive agenda in the country. The bidding war for nurses during the pandemic has made nurses aware that salaries can indeed be negotiable. The challenge for us is to understand our value and worth and to uphold the standards of our profession at the same time. Just as in the last major nursing shortage, it is time for nurses – from the bedside to the board room – to use their voices to bring about change.

Nurses are well known for putting the care of others first, but the opportunity to take better care of ourselves is presenting itself, and we should use that opportunity to advance our own worth and the worth of our profession.

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