

A Day Without a Nurse

It is May . . . time to celebrate spring, the return of warm weather, greenening trees, and our annual Congress. National Nurses Week is in May, and the whole month is devoted to oncology nursing. Hospitals across the country will find ways to pay tribute to their nursing staff with food, gifts, and pampering. The celebration is usually pretty short-lived but welcome nonetheless. Because we celebrate nurses particularly during the month of May, the American Nurses Association called on its affiliate organizations to consider addressing the value of nurses in any publications printing during the month. I welcomed the opportunity to participate. As I pondered what to say, I found myself wondering what our world would be like if we took away all the nurses for even one day.

Just a few moments of thought brings to mind a long list of the holes that would exist in our daily lives if nurses were not there to fill them. Hospitals as we know them might not even be able to exist. Especially in today's healthcare world, the knowledge and skill level required of professional nurses dwarfs the expectations of nurses even a decade ago. Surgeons could still perform surgery with the help of trained technicians I suppose, but who would make up for the shortfall in available anesthesiologists when the nurse anesthetists disappeared? Safety standards, preoperative teaching, and anticipation of patient and surgical team needs go unattended. Are there enough neonatal intensive care unit (ICU) physicians to go around to provide the constant one-on-one attention needed by newborns no larger than the palm of your hand? How many patients with myocardial infarctions would never make it out of the emergency room, assuming there was somewhere for them to go when all the ICUs and operating rooms could not function? We all have had the experience of visiting a physician who chooses to staff the office with those untrained in health care. What if every encounter in a doctor's office consisted only of a set of vital signs taken by someone who may know how to work the machine but has little idea

of the significance of the information, someone to take the copayment, and the usual three-minute doctor visit?

Think for a minute about the quality of health in our communities if there were no public health nurses to track down those diagnosed with tuberculosis or sexually transmitted diseases. How many more of us would go without basic medical care because there was no one to staff the Department of Health clinics, free clinics, and nurse-run facilities car-

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ing for those who have no other options? What would happen to those receiving inpatient care in psychiatric hospitals and drug and alcohol rehabilitation units and outpatient counseling from psychiatric/mental health nurses? Think about what would happen without the legions of other, less visible nurses: military nurses, school nurses, home health and hospice nurses, clinical trials nurses, midwives, pastoral care nurses, forensic nurses—every one of us could add to this list.

And what about all the positions that are one step away from direct patient care? Think about the ramifications of the loss of all the nurses who fill hospital administration jobs. Nursing has long been a fertile training ground for experienced and knowledgeable leaders for all manner of ancillary hospital departments. Check in any college or university with a nursing school and you will find the nursing faculty members serving on campuswide committees and supporting the work at affiliated hospitals. Take them all out of the equation and consider how those gaps would ever be filled. The next time there is a disaster, how would the Red Cross manage without paid and volunteer nursing staffs? Pharmaceutical companies have become major employers of nurses who do everything from training to educating and selling. Nurses know how to do the

job and bring a work ethic to the role that is valued and appreciated. We know how to pitch in, improvise, be flexible, problem solve, and we do it all with attention to those around us and not just to the condition or situation at hand. We come in all shapes, sizes, and ages and are from a wide range of academic preparations. No matter where you go you in this world, from the poorest to the most developed countries, you will find nurses doing their jobs with dedication and integrity. Take them all way for even one day and the results would be felt instantly and, I dare say, catastrophically.

On the plus side, the absence of nurses would create enough jobs to make up for the global employment losses. I wonder how well an autoworker could care for a fresh post-op patient? Do you think laid-off bankers could follow up on a salmonella outbreak? How well do you suppose an unemployed secretary would be able to screen middle-school children for scoliosis? Will all those pink-slipped teachers be enough to triage everyone who comes into the emergency room? How many newborns will go hungry because no nurse was available to teach the mother how to breastfeed correctly? How many patients will die alone and in pain because no nurse was around to ensure they had enough pain and symptom management? These are not just unappealing scenarios. I suspect our world would begin to crumble around us—until, of course, a nurse stepped in to take charge.

So cheers to us all. The work is hard and the hours are long, but we are an integral part of health care as well as our larger society. The next time any nurse does a job, regardless of what that job might be, remember that she or he is necessary, needed, and instrumental to the functioning of the hospital or clinic, the community, and ultimately to society. One week or one month's tribute is not really sufficient, but we will take it in the knowledge that, even without the recognition, we would still do the job.

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Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/09.ONF.259