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The Position of Nurses in the Healthcare Team in 2020

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2020 is the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife and the 200th anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birth; a year meant for celebration, and a deeper look at the importance of the nursing role in the future of healthcare. Today, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of the nurse and the urgent need for investment of this precious resource is at the forefront of many health policy makers' agendas.

As we entered 2020, many countries were already facing a nursing shortage. The World Health Organization's first *State of the World's Nursing* report, launched in April this year, reported a global shortage of six million nurses (1). As nurses account for nearly 50% of the global health workforce, this shortage has and will have a profound effect on healthcare teams.

The position of the nurse on the healthcare team is first and foremost the responsibility to people requiring nursing care, to work closely with the patient to ensure they understand what the health issues are, what the treatment is, what choices they have, and what they need to do to get better. The nurse's role is also to inform and educate patients, families and communities on prevention, and provide advice and emotional support.

These crucial roles of patient liaison, advocate and educator have come to the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many patients have been isolated from their families. As well as providing the high quality, patient-centred care so desperately needed, nurses have stepped in to offer the comfort and support and have found ways to bring messages from the family to the patients – via letters, emails, or virtual calls.

As members of the healthcare team, nurses have always brought their caring and compassionate skills along with their clinical skills to bear in the delivery of care. There is currently no cure for COVID-19 and the threat of the disease is ever-present and frightening. In this situation the technical and clinical expertise of nurses is vital, but the compassionate aspects of nursing care are also crucial to helping individuals and families cope with living with what has happened to them, and the uncertainty of the pandemic.

Nurses are key to prevention, engaging in health promotion at a primary care level, and teaching patients to wash their hands and use masks appropriately. Maintaining a safe environment within hospitals is also crucial to patients and health workers, and here nurses' position in the healthcare team takes on a key role in infection prevention and control (IPC) (2, 3). IPC nurse specialists monitor and control infection outbreaks and train their colleagues in how to use personal protective equipment (PPE) properly, a vital intervention in the time of a rampant pandemic (2).

Compassion, advocacy and education are not new to the nursing role, however. Neither is working with vulnerable populations, improving access to healthcare, and delivering patient-centred, evidence-based care. Since the days of Florence Nightingale – the founder of modern nursing – nurses have been key to all these roles. I have been fortunate enough to visit the Florence Nightingale museum at the Selimiye Barracks where she cared for soldiers during the Crimean War in the mid-1800s. It is here that Florence Nightingale discovered the importance of sanitation and its relation to mortality. This year we celebrated her 200th birthday and honour the lessons she passed on to us from that terrible war.

But what has changed since then is the growing recognition of the nursing role and its critical importance to the efficiency of the healthcare team and to the care of populations. COVID-19 is demonstrating that our nursing workforce is the bedrock

of preparedness and strong health systems and it is also showing that investing in nurses and healthcare workers is good for our economies, our national security, and even our freedom to meet friends and relatives.

Now with a vaccine within our grasp, nurses will be key to the roll-out of this mass vaccination programme. The majority of staff administering the vaccines and giving advice will be nurses, but they are already hugely overstretched by the demands of the second wave of the virus, and by their levels of infection and illness, which remain worryingly high. Nurses must be prioritised for the vaccine so they can be in a position to deliver on the promise of the vaccine and in order to protect the health systems in which they work. Additionally, in order for this massive task to succeed, we need to have senior nurse leaders in the management teams controlling the vaccination response in every county, right up to government level.

The *State of the World's Nursing* report urges governments to:

- “invest in the massive acceleration of nursing education – faculty, infrastructure and students – to address global needs, meet domestic demand, and respond to changing technologies and advancing models of integrated health and social care;
- create at least 6 million new nursing jobs by 2030, primarily in low- and middle-income countries, to offset the projected shortages and redress the inequitable distribution of nurses across the world;
- strengthen nurse leadership – both current and future leaders – to ensure that nurses have an influential role in health policy formulation and decision-making, and contribute to the effectiveness of health and social care systems.” (1)

Many countries have large numbers of nurses approaching retirement age. These countries must take urgent action to increase the number of nursing students in training to offset the impending retirement of their most experienced and valued members of the workforce. While recruitment and education are hugely important, so too is retention of the current workforce through improving working conditions and remuneration.

With a workforce that is approximately 90% female, nurses continue to face discrimination and inequality, including pay and gender biases. The statistics in the *State of the World's Nursing* report show a third of nurses report not being respected or valued and a quarter say they have experienced sexual harassment. This demonstrates the importance of implementing gender-sensitive working policies to support a workforce that is predominantly female.

The promotion of advanced practice nursing (APN) is one of the most efficient and effective ways to address the fault lines in our healthcare systems revealed by the current COVID-19 pandemic. APN helps countries deliver high-quality, safe, affordable, patient-focused care around the world.

Achieving universal health coverage requires that nurses' role in promoting well-being and providing primary health care must be optimized. Much of the mortality burden for COVID-19 has been borne by people with

existing vulnerabilities, especially preventable comorbidities, and often within communities already at high risk of communicable and non-communicable diseases. Addressing these falls firmly within the scope of nursing, and in going forward, nurses need to be enabled through the use of advanced technology, collaboration within multidisciplinary teams, and adequate support, to fulfil this scope.

We need proper, long-term workforce planning, and an investment in the nursing workforce that will produce massive dividends in terms of gender equity, improved health and wellbeing for local communities, and economic benefits for the whole of society.

Just as the devastation of the Crimean War led Florence Nightingale to transform nursing, so may this pandemic, which has caused such suffering and death, lead to a transformation in how the world perceives and values nurses and nursing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the world the true value of nursing. This is a time for bold action by brave politicians whose timely decisions will leave a mark on history that will be appreciated by generations to come. This year must be more than just a celebration. It must be a time of action and commitment by governments and health systems to empower the nursing profession and support the capacity of nurses to meet the growing demands and health needs of individuals and communities.

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