



Nurses: A Voice to Lead

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

The International Council of Nurses' (ICN) theme for this year's International Nurses Day (IND) is 'Nurses: A Voice to Lead, Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs). The SDGs highlight the social determinants of health such as poverty and education that result in avoidable and unfair health inequities. These are seen within countries and Australia is not immune to these challenges.

“Universal health coverage is one of the most powerful social equalizers among all policy options. It is the ultimate expression of fairness” (Dr Margaret Chan)¹

Nurses are involved in almost every health intervention, treatment and programme. As a result they play a pivotal role in determining the quality, efficiency and accessibility of care. The health system would benefit with cost-effective and accessible quality care if nurses could work to their full scope of practice.²

Defining leadership

At its heart, leadership is broadly accepted to be about influencing others to accomplish common goals. In nursing, it has been described as a complex and multifaceted process which involves providing support, motivation, coordination and resources to individuals or teams to achieve collective objectives.³ Every nurse has a voice and can use it to make a difference, it is the voice of the individuals, families, groups and communities who we work with. The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) joins ICN in urging nurses to become leaders.

Role of the nurse leader in today's health sector

Health care systems are complex and unpredictable environments; some would say they are in chaos. Factors contributing to this include:

- economic uncertainty and nursing workforce challenges
- an aging population – increasingly affected by chronic disease
- rising health costs
- technological change
- a need to improve equity and accessibility of the system.

In addition to the challenging environment, there is a need to maintain or improve safety and quality, all the while trying to contain costs of health service delivery, improve productivity and recruit and retain skilled staff.⁴

It is the responsibility of all nurse leaders to:

- ensure effective health outcomes by providing informed and experienced perspectives and inspiring others
- operate at a health systems level to understand the complex interactions of policies, regulation and economic incentives; and understand that change is needed for reform
- they achieve this by drawing upon clinical, operational and health systems perspectives of the nursing profession
- understand education systems, the principles of health workforce education and its relationship with the health research agenda
- understand the relationship between education, research and practice.

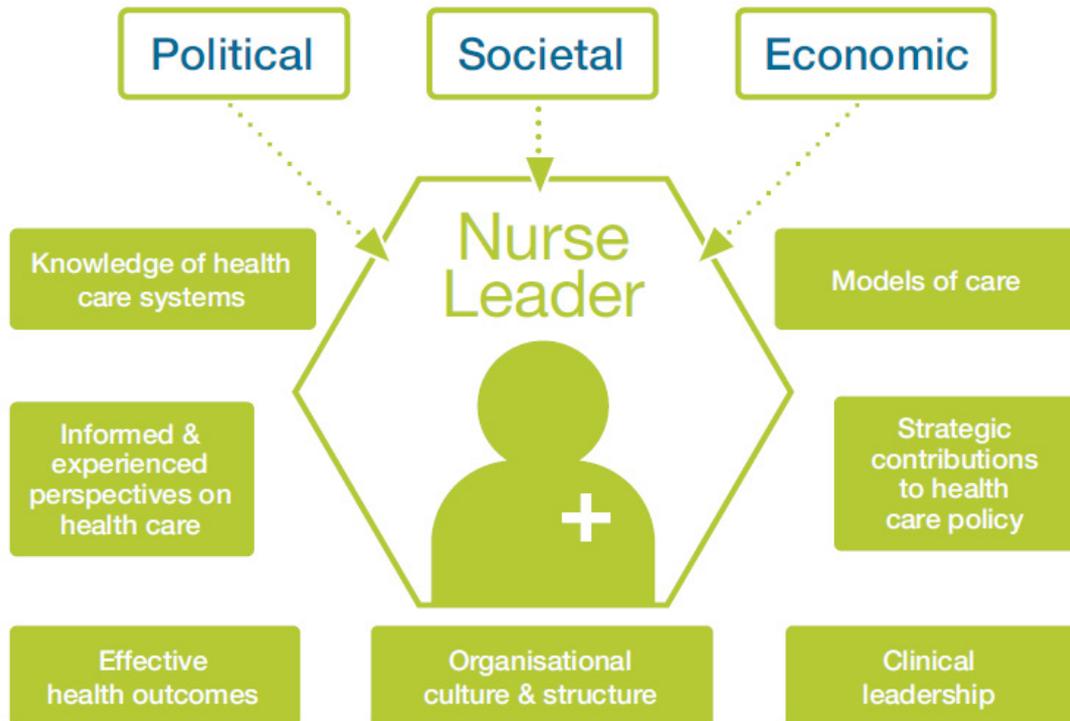
1 Chan, M. WHO Director-General addresses ministerial meeting on universal health coverage (2015).

2 Australian College of Nursing, Nurses are Essential in Health and Aged Care Reform (2016) <https://www.acn.edu.au/sites/default/files/advocacy/20160930_nurses_are_essential_to_health_and_aged_care_reform_white_paper_web.pdf>.

3 Australian College of Nursing, Nurse Leadership (2015) <https://www.acn.edu.au/sites/default/files/leadership/ACN_Nurse_Leadership_White_Paper_FINAL.pdf>.

4 Australian College of Nursing, above n 3.

Nurse leadership in the Australian health system



Nurses use persuasion to help negotiate a mutually desirable outcome and we use influence to empower people to make positive changes. The nursing voice is a commanding one because we understand the links between wider conditions and individual and population health, and we see the health needs of the patient beyond the medical diagnosis.

The Australian College of Nursing White Paper ‘Nurses are Essential in Health and Aged Care Reform’ points out that “nurses are the core of health systems worldwide, and are integral to the delivery of care throughout the health and aged care system. In Australia, the nursing profession is the most flexible and wide-reaching health and aged care provider, and is central to health care delivery regardless of time, setting or service level. As health system experts, nurses are critical in navigating patients through ... [the] system”.⁵

Nurse Leaders need to equip, enable and encourage nurses at all levels to be leaders and to drive a culture of innovation. The process should involve a combination of training, education, culture development, structures and programs. Type ‘Nurse Leadership @ ACN’ into YouTube to view ACN’s nurse leadership video.

“Never has there been a time when the voices of nurses are more urgently needed at high levels of policy formation and decision-making than they are now.”
(Judith Shamian, ICN President 2013-2017)⁶

⁵ Australian College of Nursing, above n 2.

⁶ Judith Shamian, ‘Global perspectives on nursing and its contribution to healthcare and health policy: Thoughts on an emerging policy model’ (2014) 27 (4) Nursing Leadership, 44.

Nurses leading the way and the benefits of extended scope of practice

- The Australian Primary Care Collaborative Program which has resulted in improved health outcomes for more than 320,000 people with diabetes and more than 210,000 people with coronary heart disease.⁷
- The Practice Nurse Incentive Program allows practice nurses to have a greater focus on chronic disease management, prevention and education and financial support to expand the number of nurses employed in general practice.⁸
- The Mental Health Nurse Incentive Program has resulted in a reduction in the total number of admission days by 58% and the average length of stay from 37.2 days to 17.7 days.⁹
- Western Desert Dialysis program is currently providing dialysis to over 300 people, with that number expected to reach 400 in 2018.¹⁰
- Townsville Hospital established an innovative model for the provision of chemotherapy in rural areas which addresses difficulties in accessing health services for rural patients. A specialist nurse uses video link technology to oversee the treatment provided by a rural health nurse in a rural hospital. This results in improved patient satisfaction and access to care, reduced patient and hospital expenses and generally improved patient welfare.¹¹

ACN offers nursing leadership programs including the Emerging Nurse Leader program as well as workshops for newly qualified and mid-career nurses and midwives, and seminars and events supporting nurse leaders.

Nurses are first and foremost patient advocates, and as such advocacy sits at the core of what it means to be a nurse. Like all advocates nurses act in the best interest of their patients.

The SDGs are an opportunity for nurses to influence decision making processes and health care policies. Nurses are needed and wanted around the policy-making table¹² and it is a logical extension and expression of the profession's care and compassion.

Nursing leadership will continue to be increasingly important in addressing rising rates of chronic disease, such as obesity and diabetes. Furthermore, nurses' experience working across broad sectors to address the social determinants of health will be valuable as populations adapt to emerging health concerns, such as those brought on by climate change.

Celebrating International Nurses Day 2017 gives nurses a valuable opportunity to reflect on the SDGs, the great work already being done, and consider how nurses can further lead and contribute to achieving these vital goals.

7 Australian Primary Care Collaboratives Program, Results < <https://apcc.org.au/about-apcc/results/>>.

8 Department of Human Services, Practice Incentives Program < <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/health-professionals/services/medicare/practice-incentives-program>>.

9 Department of Health and Ageing, Evaluation of the Mental Health Nurse Incentive Program Final Report < [https://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/DD58A9B56E005910CA257BF0001ACCD7/\\$File/evalnurs.pdf](https://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/DD58A9B56E005910CA257BF0001ACCD7/$File/evalnurs.pdf)>.

10 Department of Health, '\$15.3 Million for Purple House' (Media Release, 30 July 2015) < <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/ministers/publishing.nsf/Content/health-mediarelayr2015-nash036.htm>>.

11 Males, T. Remote Chemotherapy Supervision via Telehealth. 2014.

12 Khoury, C.M., et al., 'Nursing leadership from bedside to boardroom: a Gallup national survey of opinion leaders' (2011) 41 (7-8) Journal of Nursing Administration, 299.