Nurses: A Force for Change

“Health system resilience can be defined as the capacity of the health actors, institutions and population to prepare for and effectively respond to crises; maintain core functions when a crisis hits; and, informed by lessons learned during the crisis, reorganise if conditions require it.” Kruk et al (2015) pp. 1910

IMPROVING HEALTH SYSTEMS’ RESILIENCE

Building on the theme of recent years, ICN has focused this year’s theme for International Nurses Day (IND) on resilience. The theme, ‘Nurses: A Force for Change: Improving Health Systems' Resilience encourages nurses to consider the ways in which they can contribute to developing strong and resilient health systems locally, nationally and globally. This factsheet highlights the major themes covered in the IND toolkit produced by ICN for nurses and policy makers, providing information, tools and ideas to support nurses and national nurses associations (NNAs) to take action and become involved in health policy. The toolkit highlights the possibilities nursing can make reality by bringing the profession’s creativity and expertise to the reform agenda.

The key issues

Meeting the rising demand for service delivery is the most significant and ongoing challenge for health systems across the globe. While a number of factors driving this demand are somewhat predictable, others are less so. Ageing populations, increasing levels of chronic disease, the changing and growing expectations of consumers and advances in health technology are all expected to contribute to varying degrees. Less predictable and perhaps even more challenging are events highlighting the vulnerability of global health systems.

The nursing profession has a long history in adapting to meet the changing needs of communities to ensure access to high quality health care. In addition to the ever increasing burden of chronic disease and ageing populations, emerging issues including pandemics, natural disasters, climate change, antimicrobial resistance, conflict and migration will require health systems to respond more often, at a greater rate and often on a much larger scale. The need to adapt to these emerging challenges will require a new generation of leadership and innovation. As nursing becomes increasingly connected across systems and communities, the profession will look to confident, well informed leaders who understand these pressures and their role in developing the nursing workforce to meet them.1

It is vital that governments and policy makers understand that confident, well informed nursing leaders who understand their role in developing a workforce to meet new challenges are essential to ensure the success of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and to meet the challenges of the future.

Essential to developing resilient, successful health systems is the ability to learn, adapt and change. Resilient systems require long term investment in six key areas which are linked to the six building blocks of health systems and include adequate numbers of trained health workers, available medicines, robust information systems, appropriate infrastructure, sufficient public investment and a strong public sector to enable the delivery of equitable, quality services.2

Nurses at the core of resilience

Nurses at all levels, including within government and policy sectors make significant contributions to developing, strengthening and maintaining resilience in health systems across the globe. Nurses contribute to service development and planning, supervise, educate and develop other members of the health care team, work with and advocate for patients, their

families and carers and undertake research to inform the development of evidence. 3 There are many areas in which nurses can contribute to strengthening systems and health workforce development. These include: 4

- Leading and supporting inter professional education (IPE) and inter professional collaborative practice;
- Advocating for a paradigm and operational shift in health care that balances illness focussed care with population health;
- Identifying and championing global and national strategies to address health workforce maldistribution and migration;
- Strengthening and diversifying primary health care;
- Ensuring a strong nursing voice in all health system policy development and planning dialogues;
- Considering the influence of regulation and legislation on the health system and HRH planning issues;
- Designing and improving information infrastructures and data collection to support health system and redesign and planning;
- Participating in research related to HRH and in health systems research and evaluation; and
- Considering the influence of complex, ubiquitous social and gender issues such as the determinants of health, and inequality and inequity.

Nurses are well placed to contribute to the development of health systems, however for the majority of nurses, it is at the individual, team and organisational levels that they are able to have the most influence.

DEVELOPING ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE

There is evidence linking organisational resilience and health outcomes with positive strategies to develop organisational resilience able to support significant benefits including improved individual and organisation productivity, improved well-being and reductions in turn over and absenteeism. 5 Nurses throughout health systems are able to support the development of organisational resilience in key areas including leadership, organisation culture and structure, role design and in developing systemic and external relationships to support effective and positive change. 6 Nurses also play a vital role in developing organisation strategies to support resilience which include team care, known to improve outcomes, staff and patient satisfaction and reduce system costs; and positive practice environments which offer safe, healthy and supportive workplaces including flexible work practices and risk management strategies and an organisational culture which supports effective teamwork, open communication, transparency, support, supervision and mentorship.

Developing personal resilience

All nurses have a responsibility to care for themselves and develop resilience strategies to help ensure they are capable of caring for their communities.

As individuals, nurses are often exposed to increasing pressures including regular restructures and reorganisations within institutions, organisations and systems which require them to adapt to change to the delivery of health services, but also budget constraints, changing scopes of practice and ever increasing expectations of what the workforce expected to achieve within these environments. 7, 8 Increased stress and difficult workplace environments contribute to increased rates of absenteeism, staff turnover which place even more pressure on remaining staff. While many

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approaches to dealing with these situations focus on coping strategies, they often do not assist individuals to build resilience and the ability to overcome challenges.  

Well-being specialists, Robertson and Cooper describe personal resilience as “the capacity to maintain well-being and work performance under pressure, including being able to bounce back from setbacks effectively” and have developed a model used to support approaches to strengthening resilience.

THE WAY FORWARD

Nurses must continue to strengthen their role as leaders and change agents. There are many examples of nursing taking the lead in creating transformational change and continuing to lead significant improvements throughout all levels of the system, from policy to clinical practice.

As committed, innovative and outcome focussed health professionals, nurses continue to care with resilience and versatility even with few or perhaps no resources or organisational support. However, improving health systems’ resilience requires joint efforts by key stakeholders at all levels. Nurses, in collaboration with colleagues in both health and non-health sectors, have an important role in this process. Ensuring nursing involvement in policy platforms designed to strengthen health systems can promote positive practice environments which will in turn improve the resilience across systems and health outcomes. With redesigned health systems and full participation of nurses in policy, health systems will be better equipped to provide quality and equitable health care for all, even in times of adversity.
