The Importance of Learning

I was thinking recently about how nursing has changed—no, not since I entered nursing, but in the past 3 to 5 years. We have seen “new” diseases (think of Ebola, although it is not new but merely new to the majority of us), new “caregivers” (think of Robear, a Japanese robot designed to provide care [http://www.digitaltrends.com/cool-tech/riken-robear/#.VO94ebR1gng.email]), and “new” insurance coverage (think of the Affordable Care Act). “New” always means the opportunity—in fact, the obligation—to learn, and thus, for us as nurse educators, the obligation to facilitate that learning.

At the other end of the change spectrum are those things that do not seem to ever change. Think now of the importance of communication. Is there any problem in the world, not just in health care, where someone has not said the root of the problem is poor communication? Think about systems and how critical they are to individual patients, as well as how different types of systems are critical to health care organizations. Without a system, money and time are wasted and outcomes are restricted—and that remains the core of our concerns regarding health care in the United States. We are without a system that ensures that a person can move from well to ill and back again in a smooth transition. We are without a system that transfers information about a patient from person A in place 1 to person B in place 2. Patients object to being asked the same question repeatedly, as if we distrusted their first answer or assumed that the first person who asked the question was incapable of eliciting a correct response. We are without a system that formally acknowledges the caregiver as an important part of the team and the linchpin of the road to recovery. Still, we all bemoan these continued conditions because they are beyond us. I do not mean beyond in the sense of comprehension, as many of us have great ideas about specific tactics to employ to change current practices. Rather, I mean beyond as related to our past inability to be heard in the important places by the important people who can make the critical changes.

We are all very focused on developing the psychomotor skills necessary to provide services to patients. We are equally focused on the cognitive abilities that we constantly need to hone that are related to ongoing knowledge changes. What we seem to have underdeveloped are those areas we do not think of as “nursing.” However, if we look closely at some of those skills, they are far more crucial than being able to manage the care of a critically ill patient. Think about that for a minute. Being able to manage the care of a critically ill patient is a huge challenge. What could be more important?

As we have moved toward population health (although that seems to be a bit of a bumpy road so far), we have realized that we need to have the influence to change the system, the status to interact with those who are bringing about change, and the audacity to believe that we are close enough to patients to understand their concerns about care and the way the services are delivered. Helping our colleagues learn those skills does not derive from our usual continuing education offerings. Rather, learning those skills takes on a whole different dimension—one that borrows knowledge and skills from diverse fields that influence human behavior and alter systems.

We need to take on the challenge of developing a generation of committed, brave, outspoken leaders who will challenge the status quo in health care so that instead of impacting one or two critically ill patients, the whole system is altered. This task is not easy. How do we go from saying “follow the policy and procedures” to “break the...
policy and create a new one?" How do we help others to develop the skills to work with policy effectively when few among us had the opportunity to learn before we had to perform? Not all of us have to engage in changing the system, but for those who are willing to do so, we have to be appropriately prepared to bring about the necessary change. That requires us to engage with resources we have not typically used and to maximize what they can do for all of us. It is important for our learning and for our recipients of care!

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