International Collaboration in Gerontological Nursing

The world stands on the threshold of a demographic revolution called global aging. We live in a global world where people travel for holidays and work; for some, migration is the only possible alternative to a precarious situation in their own country. Therefore, the older populations in our Western countries no longer have a shared past. To understand, help, and care for older adults from other countries, we need both specific knowledge of the individual as well as general knowledge of his or her country, culture, and family structures. According to the National Institute on Aging (2007), “there is a need to raise awareness about not only global aging issues but also the importance of rigorous cross-national scientific research and policy dialogue that will help us address the challenges and opportunities of an aging world” (p. 1).

Although different countries may have varying issues, gerontological nurses around the world are committed to enhancing the quality of life for all older people. Reaching out to our colleagues in other countries to share best practices and create innovative models of care enriches our practice and expands our often ethnocentric perspectives. We have all been surprised, at times, to learn that what we consider “best practices,” priorities in older adult care, and ways of educating nurses differ from country to country based on unique population needs and available resources. Ongoing dialogue among gerontological nurses across the world provides us with evidence-based knowledge to expand our thinking and generate new ideas for improvement of care. With e-mail, Skype™, video conferencing, and Internet-based courses, our worlds becomes closer, with many cost-effective methods to encourage collaboration. In this guest editorial, we wanted to share our personal stories of collaboration, learning, and friendship that have developed over several years and encourage gerontological nurses to expand their worldview and share their expertise with colleagues across the globe.

Two of the authors, Dr. Angela Kydd and Dr. Theris Touhy, met approximately 10 years ago at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) and soon discovered our shared passion in the care of older adults, particularly those in nursing homes and those with dementia. GSA’s international membership and nursing special interest groups offer many possibilities for meeting international colleagues. Our collaboration has continued over the years through e-mail, video conferencing between our two universities, and meeting at GSA whenever possible. We have collaborated on presentations at gerontology conferences in both of our countries and in Denmark, as well as at GSA. In the fall of 2008, Dr. Touhy received a Fulbright Senior Scholar grant to spend a month at the University of the West of Scotland, where Dr. Kydd is on the faculty. The Fulbright experience offered opportunities to collaborate with students and faculty on practice, education, and research issues related to the care of older adults, as well as learning about each other’s nursing education systems, health care systems, and aging services. The Fulbright Senior Scholar Program is an excellent opportunity to travel outside of the United States to a host institution whose needs match the expertise of the Senior Scholar.
Our collaboration in research, practice, and education has increased our understanding of the diversity in the care of older adults. We encourage you to contact international colleagues with whom you share similar interests and join in collaborative sharing. It has been said that the concerns of older people are so complex that it takes many minds together to solve them in the most competent and compassionate way. In gerontological nursing, we are experts in interdisciplinary collaboration, and now we must expand our teams to reach across countries to meet the growing challenges of a global aging society.

REFERENCES
Mälardalen University. (n.d.). Caregiver singing improves the communication between patient and caregiver. Retrieved from the Caregiving Singing in Dementia Care website: http://www.dementiacaresinging.com


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INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN GERONTOLOGY

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(http://www.cies.org). Other opportunities are also available through the Fulbright Program, both in the United States and in other countries.

Following the Fulbright experience in Scotland, Dr. Touhy and Dr. Kydd traveled to Sweden and had the privilege of meeting with Sweden’s premier gerontological nursing scholar and researcher, Dr. Astrid Norberg, and her colleague Dr. Ingegerd Fagerberg at Ersta Sköndal University College in Stockholm. We also met with doctoral students at Mälardalen University, sharing our research work and interests with plans for shared research projects. Collaboration with Mälardalen continued when Dr. Gabriella Engstrom, the Assistant Dean, completed a year of postdoctoral work as a Visiting Scholar at the Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing at Florida Atlantic University. We had the opportunity to collaborate on many research studies while she was in residence, and our collaboration will continue once she returns to Sweden. It was exciting to share our perspectives and knowledge of gerontological nursing and practice, education, and research priorities in our two countries. Students in the College had the opportunity to learn about the Swedish health care system and care of older adults in that country. One of the doctoral students from Mälardalen, Lena Marmstål, also came to the College to continue her research with Dr. Engstrom, and faculty, students, clients, and caregivers at the Memory and Wellness Center had the pleasure of hearing her presentation about her fascinating research on singing with patients with dementia to improve self-care and decrease resistive behavior (Mälardalen University, n.d.).

All of the authors are currently involved in a research study investigating factors affecting the professional esteem of health care professionals and carers working with older people—a replication of a study conducted 10 years ago by Dr. Kydd in Scotland. This study involves researchers in six countries with an anticipated 4,000 to 5,000 participants. We all face similar concerns in our countries related to the critical need to educate students in gerontological nursing and recruit and retain expert gerontological nurses. We are also collaborating on a course, “International Aging: Implications for Gerontological Nursing,” that we hope to offer on the Blackboard™ platform for students in Sweden, the United States, and Scotland.