The Institute of Medicine (2010) report on the future of nursing calls for nurses to be prepared as leaders, ready to sit at the policy table and able to lead change to improve the nation’s health. And virtually every other major recommendation in this report requires that there be strong leaders to inspire others and to envision a new future—leading the changes necessary for nurses to practice at their full scope, leaders in education reform and leaders in research.

But what does it take to educate leaders for this health care environment? Leadership has been a long-standing goal in baccalaureate and higher degree education. Too often, that goal translates into one course on leadership and another on health policy. But surely more than leadership theories and an understanding of federal, state, and local health policy is important for our students to become leaders.

The Carnegie Foundation’s reports on preparation of the professions (Benner, Surphen, Leonard, & Day, 2009; Foster, Dahill, Golemon, & Tolentino, 2006) and its recent work on doctoral education (Walker, Golde, Jones, & Bueschel, 2008) emphasize the importance of forming an identity as a member of the discipline, as a caring professional, and as a scholar and steward of the discipline. They contrast identity formation with our more traditional notions of socializing students to a role. Identity formation is more than students’ learning to fill a role; it is taking on the identity of the discipline, fundamentally transforming themselves to become the nurse or the scholar. It is a process that evolves over time, with guidance of mentors and with time for deepening self-

My child died today...
Joel Weinman, Nursing Student
Oregon Health & Science University

My child died today...
She was beautiful and vibrant—her energy was infectious
She was smart; she graduated with a double major
She was kind and responsible—she was growing up
She was sick...and she died.
My child was 22...and she died today.
Kimi had two jobs...
She was poor...
She had no insurance.
She was sick and she didn’t go get help—she was scared
She wasn’t scared that she was sick, for she only had the flu
Kimi was poor and she had no insurance, and THAT is why she was scared.
She was sick and she had no insurance and she was scared...
and so...
she died.
Kimi had no insurance
She was sick...she got worse...
and so...
she went to the hospital—she had the flu
She had no insurance...
they sent her home...
with medicine...
for pain? Kimi had the flu.
Kimi was at home, sick, scared, poor...
and dying...she had no insurance
Kimi got worse. She went back to the hospital...
it was too late
My child died today...
She died because she had no insurance;
she had two degrees and two jobs
She died because she was scared;
It would cost too much to get better
She died because she had the flu?
But hey,
At least the government didn’t get between Kimi and her doctor
She didn’t have a doctor...she was poor
She had no insurance...and so...
understanding, identifying the gifts that our students bring and how these gifts can be put in service of the discipline.

Our students at all levels of education must be supported in the development of their identity as leaders. Nurses at every level serve important interpretive and advocacy functions. As members of the largest (and most trusted) health profession, nurses have a vital role in translating proposed legislation to the public. Think of the influence nurses could have had in the recent health care reform debate—in helping the public understand that government already has a substantial role in health care through Medicare and Medicaid programs, that the strong Veterans’ Administration health care system is socialized medicine, and that what has been divisively called a “death panel” is actually simply a provision for reimbursement for providers to discuss end-of-life care with patients and their families. Nurses are witness to the effects of health care policy on the lives of people and can engage in the formulation of new policy informed by this understanding.

There are many qualities of leadership—honesty, passion, inspiration, vision are among them—and central to these qualities is the ability to serve as translator between health care policy and the lives of individual people. This interpretive practice must be central to every nurse’s education. In the Sidebar, I share a poem written by one of our senior students that clearly illustrates the interpretive skill, passion, and vision central to good leadership. The student, Joel Weinman, is a senior in our accelerated baccalaureate program, and will graduate in August 2011. I extend my deepest appreciation to Professor Sheila Kodadek, a great teacher, for her work with our students and for bringing this particular piece to my attention.

Joel explains his poem:

This poem is about one case of one person who died, presumably from the H1N1 virus, during the heated debates of 2009 that were taking place nationwide about health care reform. This woman, Kimi, was a victim of the terrorism of ignorance and greed. Kimi died today…from the flu…

And she died.
soon enough, it is likely she would not have died. I remembered this story because it was so sad and it didn’t need to occur. With continued leadership in the area of nationalized or affordable health care in [the United States], hopefully our country will not have needless deaths from illnesses that can be prevented or treated if attended to early enough.

Joel was inspired by the need to inform in order to transform. He got active, as he describes:

I spoke to parents at my daughter’s school; I spoke to very conservative co-workers who obviously had a very different view than mine; I carefully facilitated conversations with the youth that were in my charge when I worked as a youth work crew crewleader (I wanted to make sure I didn’t force my opinion upon them, but rather encouraged them to think about the topic and the policies surrounding it). Whether I made a difference through my words, I do not know. But I knew I could not stay silent on this topic as I felt so strongly against the status quo. To stay silent would have been to acquiesce to that status quo I feel so strongly against. To stay silent would have been to allow those in power to control my own personal power. To stay silent was unacceptable to me as silence equals collusion. It was the leadership of the movement that encouraged and empowered me to speak up on this issue of national importance.

I suspect this has been a transformative experience for Joel, and through it, he has become a leader. What are your students doing? What can you put in their path that will help them find their voice, speak their passions, and lead for change?

REFERENCES


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