

Lady Keith C.B.E., former Head of department of Nursing Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, and of the Department of Public Health, Wellington School of Medicine, Otago University.

Leadership in Nursing - are we promoting nursing or are we promoting health?

Lady Keith urged nurse leaders to focus on improvements in health and not just on concerns specific to nursing. She spoke of their leadership in three domains: administration, the academy and clinical practice.

She said that Florence Nightingale had provided modern nursing with a model of administrative leadership - charismatic, bold, creative, informed and persistent. She invented modern nursing specifically to respond to human health and to enable health. Moreover, she urged the academy to ensure that nursing knowledge focus on nursing the sick, not on nursing the sickness and that nursing was both an art and a science.

In clinical practice, effective nurse leaders use their knowledge and relationship skills to assist the development of individuals and to influence the care and health of communities. Lady Keith quoted from the work of Patricia Benner and her associates who set out the commonalities (Clinical Wisdom and Interventions in Critical Care: A Thinking-In-Action Approach, 1998. Benner, P, Hooper-Kyriakidis P, Stannard D.)

first, effective nurse leaders in clinical practice are authoritative knowledge workers, using their knowledge of the sciences and practice;

second, they have developed relationship skills, such as teaching and coaching that enable them to assist in the development of others and

finally, they influence the care and health of individuals, groups and communities.

Lady Keith then used some of the current challenges to the health of people in the Asia Pacific Region to illustrate where she saw opportunities for active nursing leadership. This region, which contains two-thirds of the world's population, including the populous countries of China, India and Indonesia as well as sixteen of the smallest island states, is the most disaster-prone area of the world. Three-quarters of all deaths from disasters occur in this region.

She outlined the most recent assessment of progress in the region towards the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Goals and suggested the following areas where she believed Nursing could make a significant contribution.

Modest progress has been made towards reducing child mortality (Goal 4) but most countries in the region would miss the target without renewed effort. In terms of improving maternal health (Goal 5), progress is poor and the likelihood of achieving the target is low. Modest progress has also been made in combating HIV, malaria and other communicable diseases (Goal 6) but again the target will only be achieved if countries invest in prevention, treatment and rehabilitation. While progress towards the goal of achieving environmental sustainability (Goal 7) has been modest, the likelihood of halving the proportion of people without ongoing access to safe drinking water is unlikely.

The skills nurses have can provide a firm foundation for leadership in promoting health. They score highly on empathy, trust and emotional intelligence. They have been shown to be the profession best able to manage difficult conversations within the health team. But nurse leaders must also build networks and learn how to navigate through political minefields to be truly successful because, as Lady Keith concluded, "Health is a very political affair. We delude ourselves if we try to think otherwise."

