

Declining Membership in Professional Nursing Organizations

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Nursing is one of the most influential healthcare professions. Many new challenges face the nursing profession today. The lack of nurses' involvement in professional organizations is a fundamental issue to be addressed. Stable representation is necessary for the nursing profession to influence legislation, policy, and healthcare interests in a positive way. Educating nurses about the benefits of professional organizations is a simple task that can have a dramatic impact on the future of the nursing profession.

Statement of Problem

According to Duncan, Thorne, and Rodney (2015), nurses must play an important role in guiding government and organizational changes for quality healthcare to be preserved. The nursing profession must remain a strong voice as it faces critical shortages and challenges in the near future, yet only a small percentage of nurses take advantage of the authority and power a professional nursing organization can provide (Duncan et al., 2015).

The American Nurses Association (ANA) is one of the most recognized professional organizations in nursing. According to Matthews (2012), the ANA is instrumental in advocating for patients and nurses by writing standards of nursing practice, a code of ethics, and a social policy standard. They also advocate for the rights of nurses in the workplace, and lobby for healthcare issues (Matthews, 2012). Other organizations and specialty organizations work together and separately to advocate for quality improvements for nurses and healthcare issues (Matthews, 2012). Beyers (2014) reports there are over 300 national nursing associations for registered nurses (RN) alone. Black (2014) notes that less than ten percent of the nation's nurses are members of the ANA or other professional organizations.

One state organization, the Alabama State Nurses Association (ASNA), noted that there are over 90,000 nurses in Alabama and the ASNA only has 1,263 members (Wilkinson, 2015).

Benefit of Membership in a Professional Organization

Professional organizations provide many benefits for today's nurses. Black (2014) reports professional memberships convey an attitude of responsibility toward the nursing profession and quality healthcare standards. These memberships also provide educational opportunities, certifications, leadership opportunities, and opportunities to have a voice in shaping nursing practice (Black, 2014).

A critical workforce shortage faces the nursing profession. The United States Department of Labor [DOL] (2014) reports 2,751,000 nurses are employed in the United States. The projected job growth for nurses is 16% by the year 2024, meaning over 439,000 nurses will be added to the workforce in less than 10 years (DOL, 2014). An article by Spann (2005) projected that by the year 2020, the nursing profession will see a shortage of over 800,000 nurses. Spann (2005) goes on to say that quick action must be taken to avert a critical shortage that will directly affect patient care and safety. The American Nurses Association [ANA] (2015) projects that 1,100,000 nurses will be needed by 2022 to head off a nursing shortage. The ANA is actively working to make changes to avoid the negative impact of this potential nursing shortage (ANA, 2015). Through a workforce advocacy plan, the ANA aims to make healthcare more accessible, demand quality through pay incentives, increase preventive services, increase educational opportunities for potential nurses, and increase federal funding to reinforce the number of nurses in medically underserved areas (ANA, 2015).

An example of the positive benefit of a professional nursing organization on a local level occurred in Kentucky. In 2014, the Kentucky Coalition of Nurse Practitioners and Nurse Midwives (KCNPNM) managed to change the face of Kentucky healthcare, costing the citizens of Kentucky zero dollars. An Advanced Practice Registered Nurse (APRN) in Kentucky could only write prescriptions if there was a collaborative agreement in place with a physician (KCNPNM, 2011). This severely limited the practice of APRN's in the state. The KCNPNM lobbied physicians and legislators for several years and were finally granted prescriptive authority in 2014. The KCNPNM (2011) was challenged by physicians and legislators, but they persevered and proved that they were safe prescribers and could bring quality healthcare to the medically underserved in Kentucky. As a result, some counties that were without healthcare now have convenient access to quality healthcare (KCNPNM, 2011). These are a few examples of how professional nursing organizations can work to bring positive change to the nursing profession and healthcare in general.

Collectively, nursing has the greatest number of healthcare providers, giving them the ability to change the healthcare system. Esmaili, Dehghan-Nayeri, and Negarandeh (2013) noted that professional nursing organizations are the greatest form of support for nurses resulting in the best possible nursing care to the patient. According to Esmaili, et al. (2013), professional organizations can provide the best services when membership is at its peak. "A professional organization's main strength rests in the size of its membership and the active role it plays in the profession (Esmaili, et al., 2013, p. 265)" The growth of a professional organization is linked to the dedication, tenacity, and hard work of its leaders and members (Black, 2014). Recruiting and sustaining membership in professional associations is a huge challenge as the nursing profession faces the future (Black, 2014).

Obstacles to Membership in a Professional Organization

Wilkinson (2015) notes refusal to take an active role in nursing associations will harm healthcare reform in the future. Many nurses voice discontent with nursing and healthcare; however, by not joining a professional organization an influential voice is lost to impact nursing (Wilkinson, 2015). Nursing policy is influenced by physicians, hospital corporations, insurance corporations, government, and politicians (Black, 2014). The nursing profession must maintain a strong voice to be the greatest influence that guides nursing professionalism (Wilkinson, 2015).

Nurses cite reasons for not taking part in professional organizations as cost, and confusion over many organizations (Black, 2014). The potential for confusion over the number of professional organizations is evident. A nurse has access to membership in national, state level, and specialty organizations in additions to honor societies and religious affiliated memberships (Beyers, 2014). In order for the nursing profession to have a strong voice and be the greatest influence that guides nursing professionalism Wilkinson (2015) suggests involvement at the district and state level.

A survey conducted by the Louisiana State Nurses Association (LSNA) and the Arkansas Nurses Association (ArNA) listed the number one reason for non-membership is cost. According to Booth (1999), many survey participants could not afford the high membership dues or did not feel the benefits of membership were equal to the cost. Many felt that the dues were too expensive (Booth 1999). The current cost of joining the ANA at the state and national level is \$174.00 annually for a full time employee (ANA, 2016). Many nurses show more interest in joining a specialty organization. The Emergency Nurses Association (ENA) annual membership dues are \$140.00 plus a \$25.00 donation

(ENA, 2016). Full annual membership in The Academy of Medical-Surgical Nurses (AMSNA) is \$84 (AMSNA, 2016). An annual membership in the American Association of Nurse Practitioners (AANP) is \$125.00 (AANP, 2016).

Other reasons given for not joining a professional association were family obligations, too little time, and lack of knowledge about what the organization represents (White, 2004). Disinterest in governmental policies and generational differences can also attribute to non-membership (Huston, 2014). Wilkinson (2015) noted pending retirement as a deterrent.

The Best Action for Change

In a survey conducted by White (2004), it was found that 18% of nurses are not members in professional organizations due to lack of information. White (2004) suggests improvements in communication such as active members making personal calls to motivate inactive members to attend, allowing guests at meetings, a chapter website with current information about meeting times and activities, a new-member mentoring program, and a networking representative to advance nurses in achieving professional goals. White (2004) further suggests meeting incentives such as door prizes or scholarships to conventions or educational offerings.

Wilkinson (2014) offers ideas on a more personal level such as reserving time for professional development and professional advancement, realizing the benefits of supporting one another within the profession, directing personal talents toward making positive changes, giving back to the profession, and being an influential voice. According to Black (2014), the best solution to the problem is simple and can be addressed by each individual nurse; join a professional organization. National, state, and specialty

organizations offer many ways to stay current about nursing issues through websites, journals, continuing education, and conferences (Black, 2014). The ANA provides a code of ethics and standards of care that guide nursing practice and government legislation related to nursing and healthcare (Black, 2014). When nurses do not participate they are, “silencing their own voice (p. 335),” according to Black (2014). Regarding cost, Black (2014) points out that these organizations work to keep nursing practice in the mainstream and cost is irrelevant.

This author’s proposal encompasses the ideas presented by White, Wilkinson, and Black. As pointed out by Black (2014), the first step is to join a professional organization. A nurse may wish to start at the community or state level then advance to a national level to have a voice in influencing policy (Wilkinson, 2014).

Nurses have the ability to bring the influence of a professional organization into the workplace. White (2004) points out that many institutions demand magnet recognition status and consider career advancement based on these accomplishments. Membership in a professional organization may be required in these instances (White, 2004). Although nurses may resent the idea of mandatory membership, 90% of nurses when surveyed say organized, structured, and positive professional relationships are important for a sound workplace atmosphere (White, 2004). Facilities offer excellent opportunities for marketing a professional organization through word of mouth, flyers, in-services, and mentoring. Presenting an in-service to work place colleagues about professional organizations in the community is a starting place.

Finally, be a leader through example. As Wilkinson (2014) suggests, nurses should take ownership of their professional development and the advancement of the nursing

profession. Membership offers opportunities for collaboration, networking and leadership that help to define nursing as a true profession worthy of having a voice in the advancement of healthcare and patient safety (Wilkinson, 2014). Mentoring a novice nurse provides opportunities to promote the importance of leadership in the profession. White (2004) suggests that expert nurses have leadership roles in professional organizations and that novice nurses be expected to join a professional organization in order to encourage professional development. Commitment to professional development is a simple task for an individual nurse. Wilkinson (2014) reminds us that nursing faces a challenging future and it is imperative to be involved to affect positive change.

Conclusion

Professional organizations offer a strong voice for the nursing profession. Nurses on all levels of practice can benefit from the services a professional organization can provide. Many nurses are reluctant to join professional organizations; however, efforts to boost membership are simple and feasible. The nursing profession is the most influential arm of healthcare. A professional organization can provide a voice to insure patient safety and the most favorable outcomes for the professional development of nurses.

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