

The Legacy of Leaders

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Leadership means having a vision of a greater good and initiating actions to achieve that vision. In making decisions to attain their goals, leaders create change, and that change becomes history. There will always be those opposed to change, particularly if they do not share the leader's vision. History, therefore, is not easy to make; good history is even more difficult.

Interest in nursing history has been overshadowed, all too often, by the intensity of the present. Yet much of where we are today has been and is still being formed and informed by history. Historical antecedents are useful in contemplating new decisions – not that all historical decisions can be judged as the “best” ones in retrospect. Those that were less than ideal may have been, in the context of their time, the best decisions possible. Using history as one source of information or evidence to make today's decisions has been a challenge for nursing. There are many

reasons for this, including the low status afforded to nursing history, a common tendency to look elsewhere for advice and a lack of ready access to nursing historical material.

Access to nursing history has recently made a dramatic advance. On June 15, 2005, the first-ever major exhibition on nursing opened at the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa. The exhibit, entitled “A Caring Profession: Centuries of Nursing in Canada,” explores four centuries of nursing in every region of the country, and is truly spectacular. It begins in 17th-century New France and ends on the streets of Toronto. It is made up of nine sections that reflect all aspects of nursing history and practice, including the hospital, bedside, home, community, frontier, campus, picket line and battlefield. A Nurses' Station presents interactive displays, with volunteer nurses, reference material and a space for quiet reflection. The exhibit showcases the Canadian Nursing History

Collection that was transferred to the museum from the Canadian Nurses Association. Overall, the exhibition contributes to an understanding of the historical and current role of nursing in Canadian healthcare. Equally important, it reflects nursing's contribution to the settlement and development of Canada. It makes one proud to be a nurse, and proud to be Canadian.

The exhibit inspired this ACEN column because it was clear that previous leaders in nursing have left a rich legacy, and it seemed important to remind today's leaders that they are creating our history for tomorrow. It also inspired the desire to explain how this nursing history exhibit came to be. What was the vision, and what were the decisions, that led to this important and exciting venture?

Nursing's historical artifacts and documents have traditionally been dispersed throughout Canada. Small collections exist in many hospital libraries, universities, professional associations and individual holdings. The only central, national collection was housed at the Canadian Nurses Association in Ottawa. In 1997, the leadership of CNA had a vision of a virtual world of nursing knowledge. It was to be an extensive network of a variety of services, such as best-practice guidelines, interest group discussions, professional information, continuing education and more. Part of the vision was to have a history section of the network that would be accessible to anyone. Until then, the CNA collection was rarely seen by anyone outside Ottawa. Although history was consid-

ered fundamental to the education of student nurses, few students had access to historical material.

At about the same time as these discussions were taking place, the conditions housing the CNA collection were deteriorating, and some artifacts and paper documents were beginning to show signs of damage. It was not possible or practical to create a controlled environment to house the collection in perpetuity at CNA House. The vision was to make nursing history accessible to everyone who was interested, and to safely house a major nursing history collection. Clearly, a museum was required.

A meeting was set up with the president of the Museum of Civilization to discuss possible partnerships. The results were encouraging. Because the CNA leadership was also interested in housing military artifacts and written documents, it was decided to extend the partnership discussion to include the Canadian War Museum and the National Archives of Canada.

After presenting the case, a formal partnership was formed whereby the history-of-nursing documents would be housed at the National Archives of Canada, the military history at the Canadian War Museum and the remaining artifacts at the Museum of Civilization. It was anticipated that over time the three sites would be linked and all material available virtually. It was further agreed that within seven years an exhibit would be created that would travel across Canada, if sufficient funds could be raised. CNA agreed to assist in fundraising. An

oversight advisory committee made up of nurse historians was established by CNA to work with the museums and archives staff in sustaining and building the collection. This tripartite agreement was in itself a historic event: it was the first time the three heritage institutions had formed a partnership around a national collection.

In the seven years since the signing of the agreement, the collection has grown. Planning and executing an exhibit of this nature is a major commitment. Credit goes to Christine Bates, curator of the exhibit for the Museum of Civilization, and Cynthia Toman from the School of Nursing at the University of Ottawa, who served as guest curator for the Canadian War Museum. The exhibition is open until September 4, 2006. ACEN encourages all nurses and nurse leaders to visit it over the coming year.

Besides the impressive exhibition, the Canadian Nursing History Collection has also been launched online. It contains a database of over 2,000 artifacts depicting civilian and military nursing. The original vision of making nursing history accessible to everyone is well on its way to becoming a reality.

Two other initiatives related to nursing history were launched at the same time as the exhibition. The first

was a book, *On All Frontiers: Four Centuries of Canadian Nursing*, edited by Christina Bates, Dianne Dodd and Nicole Rousseau. This comprehensive, 260-page work presents a critical overview of nursing in Canada from the 17th century to the present. It contains contributions from scholars of nursing history. A second and indirectly related initiative was the launch of a Nursing History Research Unit at the University of Ottawa. The unit is headed by Dr. Meryn Stuart and has been funded for five years by Associated Medical Services, Inc., a charitable organization in Ontario that has a long tradition of support for the history of medicine and healthcare. This is the first research unit dedicated to the history of nursing in Canada, and should make a significant contribution to the development of this field of study.

The story of the history behind the exhibition, and the exciting spinoff initiatives, is a good example of how leadership contributes to the history of nursing. All of you who read this column are actively making decisions that will contribute to the nursing history of tomorrow. What will be your legacy?

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