

Transitions

The past is a guidepost, not a hitching post.

– L. Thomas Holdcroft

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February 2007 finds ACEN in a time of chaos and opportunity – just like the worlds of nursing, healthcare and society that surround it. The pace and complexity of change are increasing. Nurses across the country are starting to talk about ways to engage in change and even help to shape it. ACEN is an important part of that unfolding healthcare future, and for the Academy, 2007 truly is a time of transition.

In January, I had the privilege of assuming (on a half-time basis) the role of ACEN's first permanent executive director. That transition creates a logical opportunity to ask "what's next" for ACEN. How will the creation of a permanent executive director help the organization realize its mission, achieve its goals and grow in strength and influence?

The introduction of any new leader tends to give us pause to think about our organizations themselves, how things might change and how we will be affected. In this case, it is a natural time to wonder what the core business of ACEN should be in the years ahead. And if we look at that question through the lens of imagination and innovation, we ask, more interestingly, what could be the business of ACEN in strengthening Canada's healthcare system? What is the open space that ACEN could and should claim to fully establish its position as "the voice of nursing leadership in Canada"?

This new beginning for ACEN also means saying goodbye and thank you to a great colleague, teacher and leader – my predecessor, Dr. Mary Ellen Jeans.

Dr. Jeans served as ACEN's secretary general over the last couple of years, helping to put structures and processes in place to build a more solid and formalized foundation for ACEN and its future. Under her leadership, as well as that of ACEN's presidents and committees, this base has been strengthened and has grown. Relationships with partner organizations have been forged, and membership has increased. ACEN thanks Dr. Jeans for her dedicated service to the organization and the lifelong role she has played in building nursing in this country. I want to thank her personally for her advice and support over many years.

Over the past year, I have had the great honour of being welcomed into the communities, workplaces and homes of nurses in every one of this (very wide!) country's six time zones. Travelling across Canada, talking with nurses about the Toward 2020 project, has been a source of much encouragement about the future of nursing. Whether they are providing direct, hands-on (and "brain-on") nursing services, teaching, conducting research or providing leadership in administrative and policy settings, Canadian nurses and nursing students have been engaged and eager to talk about the future.

Certainly we have had some hearty debates over the past year about what the map forward should look like; that is healthy, and that was the point of the project. But what has been striking is that I have not encountered a single nurse (or any other care provider, for that matter) who has said, "Leave things as they are; we don't need to change." On that matter, there has been concern and probably some trepidation – but no debate. And even though the road ahead is uncertain at best, I have seen a sense of excitement and energy across the country about the possibilities the future brings for a new way of thinking about nursing and what it can do for the health of Canadians.

The most common response to these discussions has been, "What do we do next?" What does the home care nurse "do" in all this? The CEO? The teacher? The nursing home administrator? These questions bring us back to the Academy, and what leadership role it should take in this time of change. ACEN is challenged now to ask itself the same kinds of questions. To answer them, the Academy is entering into a strategic engagement exercise to take stock of its considerable leadership strengths, and to imagine how they can be mustered to help drive nursing and healthcare forward.

Tibbs (2000) talks about the future as a "landscape" in which successful organizations are first able to identify their deepest values, strengths and gaps before they set forth on the futures journey. They must be clear about the landscape ahead; who are the players out there, and what moves are they likely to make going into the future? What are the clear objectives we visualize lying across the horizon

that make the journey worth the effort? All these variables will be on the table as ACEN's membership plans the organization's future over the coming weeks.

The most exciting part of that exercise is the freedom it brings. The only real limits are our imaginations. From new students to retiring experts, the nurses of Canada have been sending some fairly clear signals that they are ready to make some changes. But they cannot do it alone. They expect leadership that matches their expectations, and matches the complex environments that surround us. No small challenge, to be sure. But ACEN is up to the challenge and is putting the pieces in place to forge ahead in some new directions.

One of the most pressing issues to which ACEN must respond in the months ahead is the need to engage young voices, newer nurses and future leaders in the development of nursing leadership in Canada. As I heard at the National Nursing Leadership Conference in Ottawa this month, "leadership is not age dependent." Being young does not mean one cannot be a great leader, just as being older does not guarantee that one can. As part of its work in the unfolding futures agenda, ACEN will need to discover and make use of mechanisms to identify, attract, support and celebrate the kinds of nurses we want and need in healthcare leadership roles across Canada. Time is not on our side, and we need to intervene swiftly and strategically.

Sister Elizabeth Davis (2006) talks about the need to "draw new maps," citing Adrienne Rich, who said "the maps they gave us were out of date by years." ACEN is looking at its leadership "map" in 2007 and imagining the way forward. We hope you will join us in this important work. Please keep checking for updates and new ideas on the ACEN website – www.acen.ca.

To paraphrase Maya Angelou, "The horizon leans forward, offering us all space to place new steps of change." As ACEN places its own new steps of change, I look forward to communicating with you through this column, which I will use to ask questions, share perspectives and seek your support. I look forward to the journey.

References

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