

# An Interview with Dr. Judith Shamian President, International Council of Nurses

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JUDITH SHAMIAN, RN, PhD, LLD (hon), D.Sci (hon), FAAN, is the president of the International Council of Nurses (ICN). Previous positions include immediate past president and CEO of the Victorian Order of Nurses, immediate past President of the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA), executive director of the Office of Nursing Policy at Health Canada and vice-president of nursing at Mount Sinai Hospital. She is the recipient of numerous awards including the Canada's Most Powerful Women: Top 100 award; the Golden Jubilee Medal from the Governor General of Canada; and CNA's 2008 Centennial Award. From my mentor, colleague and friend here are some insights shared with *CJNL* about her current work and challenges.

**Among Canadian nurses it could be said that you have had one of the most extraordinary and fascinating careers in nursing and healthcare, nationally and internationally. What motivated you to pursue the position of ICN president?**

I was motivated to run for the presidency of ICN because I believe in the value of the nursing profession and the essential role of nurses in improving the lives of human beings across the globe. I also believe nurses need to make contributions on the global policy stage. Nurses' knowledge and experience are incredibly strong assets to bring to bear at decision-making tables. It is incumbent on us to make sure that nurses are active participants within forums and organizations that drive policy. On a personal note, I think that the role of ICN president fits well with who I am, as an individual and as a professional. It is my belief that given my abilities and values, I can bring value to the organization in the face of some very difficult situations in the health of societies worldwide.

We are at the stage of global development and global transformation on many fronts. On the health front, there is a growing recognition that we need to focus on primary healthcare and non-communicable diseases. These are areas in which nursing excels and has so much to offer. Despite the contributions we can make, we are far too often absent from the tables where we can bring tremendous value. I am hopeful that through my presidency and work with nursing and global communities, this landscape will be changed.

**What excites you most about being in the role of ICN president?**

Being ICN president brings me the privilege of hearing about and seeing the great works of nurses all over the world. It delights me to be able to bring their stories to many different forums. I am also very pleased to see that in many organizations there is a real desire to engage in dialogue with ICN and examine how nursing, nurses and ICN can be part of a much larger agenda.

**What do you see as the biggest challenge(s) facing ICN over the next decade?**

ICN is challenged to address and effectively reverse the worldwide erosion of nursing and its impact on health and public policy. We live at a time in which many of us have great amounts of knowledge, information, experience, expertise and research but unfortunately, it is not being put to good use. We need to have a serious look at how we prepare our nurses for leadership roles, and consider expanding our great nursing education programs with topics or subjects such as political science, public health, economics and epidemiology, to name but a few. We need to take on positions outside of traditional healthcare systems in organizations such as governments, the World Bank, United Nations agencies and others. We have to understand the importance of engaging in politics, both as elected politicians and working with or for politicians. By appreciating, understanding and acting upon issues influenced by nursing and nurses, we can take action and secure a central place at decision-making tables. If we don't become savvy in these arenas, nursing will continue to take a back seat, with everyone else being ahead of the pack, and the visibility of nursing will become non-existent.

**What do you see as your greatest personal challenges as ICN president over the next four years?**

My major challenges for the next four years are twofold. First of all, I want to see that our various nursing communities work together on achieving shared goals such that all nurses – educators, regulators, professional organizations, unions, management and others – are united with a common voice. While we each have

a different mandate, there is a need to converge on a shared agenda and work on critical issues together. The second challenge is to work at creating linkages among nurses at the local, regional, national and global levels to the health and social agendas. If I can make some inroads in these two areas before the end of my term, I will be able say that I have accomplished my primary goals as president.

### **In your opinion, why is the existence of ICN relevant to nurses? Citizens? Healthcare?**

ICN's relevance can be outlined on many fronts. For nurses providing care every day, ICN can be a voice for how practice should look. Furthermore, it can articulate the parameters of what constitutes the right education and the right working conditions for nurses. On a national level, ICN speaks out on behalf of nurses to address issues of concern within individual countries. For example, just recently one of our member countries asked for ICN's intervention because their government was about to pass legislation that would see every nurse or doctor punished for every single medical error. Given that such an approach is contradictory to our current support for continuous improvement and advancing organizational cultures that address issues of patient safety non-punitively, ICN intervened.

In global situations, ICN monitors and contributes to policy discussions as they take place within United Nations agencies and beyond. Through interventions at the World Health Assembly of WHO (World Health Organization) and partnerships with organizations like the International Committee of Red Cross and others, ICN takes an active role in shaping policies and opinions.

### **In your opinion, how/why is the work of ICN important to Canadian nurses?**

ICN's work is very relevant to Canadian nurses as ICN provides leadership at the global level. Canada is one of the residents of this "global village" and decisions made at the United Nations, World Health Organization, International Labour Organization and other global agencies all have an impact on Canada and the work of every nurse in Canada.

Furthermore, the Canadian government works with many other groups, whether the European Union, the G8 or ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and others. Canada is positioned to bring an influential voice and advance agendas within regional and global health. Canada's nurses can influence the messages and directions the Canadian government takes to the global arena. In sum, ICN can carry important messages on behalf of the collective nursing family to many international decision-making bodies.

**How does it feel to be in a position to represent nurses worldwide?**

I feel like the nursing queen. On a more serious note, it is extremely humbling to feel that I carry this huge responsibility to speak out and represent our 16 million nurses. I take this responsibility very seriously, and it is clear to me that I need to try to have an impact and make a difference every day. Individually, 16 million nurses make a difference every day and in their own way, each contributes to making this world a better place. The world needs to know it, the world needs to recognize it, the world needs to honour it and remember it. While I take pleasure in the fact that in many countries, survey after survey identifies nurses as the most valued professionals, I am extremely troubled by our limited impact on the policy and decision-making levels. As a result, I feel that I have a huge responsibility to take the nursing voice and profile to the world stage.

**In the early months of your term, what are your initial observations of nursing leadership throughout the world? Any words of wisdom for Canadian nurse leaders?**

Nurses in Canada have to realize that we have one of the best healthcare systems in the world. We provide universal healthcare, we have an excellent nursing education system and superb clinicians and care organizations. Because we have so much, there is even more reason that, as Canadians, we have a duty to be players and influential in the global scene.

I also want to ask nurses in Canada to embrace leadership, influence and impact with regard to the health and well-being of others within and outside healthcare. I implore you to be courageous – take on positions in non-traditional healthcare organizations; find employment in government, and community and social agencies; run for office and expand your horizons; continue your education; apply for international jobs – all can be so incredibly rewarding. We live in an amazing world, and nursing is the best profession, as it can open so many doors. Want to be a player on the world stage? Seize the day – the world is waiting!

**If you could achieve three goals during your tenure as ICN president, what would they be?**

There are external “impact” goals and internal-to-ICN “impact” goals. Most important to your readers are my external impact goals, which I have alluded to throughout this interview. These include:

1. Strengthening the profile and role of nursing and ICN with the leading non-health agencies that have a strong influence on health financing and policies, such as the World Bank;

2. Building a global, regional and national understanding, appreciation and action for the evidenced-based quality and economic value of nursing;
3. Getting nurses engaged to assume influential positions in global organizations and politics.

My work as ICN president, and the work of ICN, is of particular importance at this time in the history of nursing. Having an opportunity to bring my passion and commitment to an organization on a global level is a privilege. It is exciting and invigorating, yet daunting and concerning. Our time is now, and together we can make a difference on the global stage. Come act with me now! You can learn more about what I am up to by following me on Twitter: @judithshamian.

# Breakfast with the Chiefs

is not for everyone.

*You must have an appetite  
for good ideas!*



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