

Dear Dr. Nagle,

I am writing in response to the question you posed in the *Canadian Journal of Nursing Leadership* 26(4), "Is There Unity in an Image?" Many nurses' unions across the country are grappling with the same question, particularly in light of persistent and pervasive negative media representations. But Canada's nurses' unions have also posed a broader, more complex question to their members: "How can we create a better understanding of the nurse's role and value to our healthcare system?"

Renewing and reinforcing our common sense of identity as nurses is a priority for our nurses' unions. One aspect of identity is creating a common professional visual image so that nurses are distinguished from other healthcare staff. Recently, Nova Scotia Nurses' Union negotiated a white-and-black uniform campaign, in which nurses use distinctive uniforms – black pants or skirt and a white top – to stand out from other workers. The campaign has met with a favourable reaction from patients, families and other healthcare professionals. New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador unions support this measure and have supported their members in wearing common uniforms. Out west, Saskatchewan Union of Nurses is encouraging its RNs to wear the traditional white top to assert their professional presence. Similarly, the United Nurses of Alberta urges RNs to participate in Wear White Wednesdays (or the wearing of a pin identifier). This effort to make nurses more visible has also highlighted how few nurses are actually present on hospital wards, raising the question of patient safety.

Newfoundland and Labrador Nurses' Union has also launched the Clarity Project, which aims to help RNs in the province articulate their common identity through common visual identifiers or proactively identifying themselves as nurses and by clarifying what they contribute to our healthcare system on a daily basis. As nurses step up and convey their confidence in their identity and educate others about their essential role, the public, employers, other healthcare professionals and decision-makers will develop a greater understanding of and appreciation for nurses and what they bring to our healthcare system.

The Ontario Nurses' Association takes the position that education is the key to improving nurses' image. Their latest campaign (www.morenurses.ca) makes a powerful case for hiring more nurses in Ontario. ONA continues to lobby for the integration of nurses into public policy development and decision-making at all levels of healthcare organizations and government.

For the CFNU, improving the position of nurses in influencing healthcare decision-making is central to all our discussions with both provincial and national decision-makers. Nurses need to stand united – to speak with one voice – leveraging the important role we have as the largest group of healthcare professionals in the country. Evidence shows that we, as front-line workers, have a direct impact on the quality and efficiency of care, as well as on patient safety.

Both nurse managers and direct care nurses need to be recognized as autonomous decision-makers. In 2014, we still lag behind in terms of our impacts on budgets, safe staffing or positioning ourselves as important players within the healthcare system. Why this failure to recognize nurses' leadership? The lack of a united voice remains an ongoing obstacle. By spring, the CFNU will publish a report from UBC professor Dr. Maura MacPhee, which positions nursing as the central force within the Canadian healthcare system.

I encourage everyone to celebrate with Canada's nurses on May 12, 2014, the day that honours nurses, as nurses' unions across the country wear white to promote the broader recognition of the importance of nurses to our healthcare system in standing together to safeguard patient safety.

Yours truly,

Linda Silas, RN, BScN
President,
Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions

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**References**

Nagle, L. 2013 (December). "Is There Unity in an Image?" *Canadian Journal of Nursing Leadership* 26(4): 1–3. doi: 10.12927/cjnl.2013.23637.