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THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION
NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL

by
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A military general reviewing and addressing his troops once said, "A collection of soldiers is no more an army than a collection of bricks is a house". This statement might also have application for nursing. We speak of the "nursing profession" but without organization there is no profession. A country may have a small or large number of individual nurses - that is to say a collection of individuals each going about his or her own business, in his or her own way. It requires unified efforts on the part of us all if our motives and intentions are to be translated into effective community action.

It is therefore salutary sometimes to think back to the past and to those essential factors which guided our pioneers - pioneers in professional nursing organization. In a century when organization for women was almost unknown, they had the genius and foresight to realize that a profession organized is a profession equipped for service; and that individuals of their own effort and volition can never accomplish what an organization, democratically constituted, can accomplish on their behalf. This then was the beginning, at the end of the nineteenth century, of professional organization for nurses, first nationally, then internationally, as one by one national associations became organized in order to join the International Council of Nurses which was founded sixty-one years ago, in 1899. It can, in fact, claim to be the oldest international professional organization, and we as nurses should feel proud of its long history and varied accomplishments, all carried out on behalf of its Member Associations and those which are seeking or are being assisted towards full membership.

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Here is the Preamble to its Constitution which, with slight amendments in wording but none in meaning, has remained unchanged throughout the years:

"We, Nurses, representing various nations of the world, sincerely believing that the profession of nursing will be advanced by greater unity of thought, sympathy and purpose, do hereby unite in a federation of national associations of nurses. Such national associations shall be non-political, shall embrace all religious faiths, and shall work together for the purpose of promoting the health of nations, improving the nursing care of the sick, advancing the professional and economic welfare of nurses and enhancing the honour of the nursing profession."

To many of us the word "nursing" has several meanings. First there is nursing education, or the method by which we learn how to nurse, and this is a process which continues throughout our professional lives. As we were reminded by Miss Nightingale a hundred years ago, "In nursing, unless we are making progress every year, every month, every week, we are going back. A woman who thinks in herself, now I have learned all there is to be learned, she is gone back already."

Secondly, there is nursing service, which is the purpose for which we practise, the justification for our existence as nurses, the reason why we prepare and educate ourselves and the way in which we interpret all that we have learned in an endeavour to meet the ever-growing needs of the community in which we live.

Finally, when we speak of nursing, many of us think of professional organization - organization for service, organization for education, and including a professional Nurses' Association, which should be the "scaffolding" and structure within which nursing education and nursing service can advance and develop along the best and most modern lines.

So what does the International Council of Nurses do, in connexion with these various aspects of nursing and on behalf of its Member Associations?

First of all, some factual information about its organization and the way in which it functions.

The International Council of Nurses (I.C.N.) is a federation of National Nurses' Associations. At the present time Associations in forty-six countries are in active membership, and in a further twenty-one countries the nurses have

National Associate status - a representative nominated by the nursing profession in the country acting as a liaison between the nurses of that country and the I.C.N. Individual membership of the I.C.N. is now approximately 460,000, and through these contacts with national nursing organizations and with individual nurses, the I.C.N. can claim to exert a world-wide influence on nursing affairs and the improvement of health.

As a Non-Governmental Organization representing the largest number of members of the nursing profession on a world basis, the I.C.N. is in official relationship with the World Health Organization, is on a Special List maintained by the International Labour Organization, and is on the Consultative Register of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, which allows for representation by the I.C.N. on any of the Commissions of the Economic and Social Council.

The I.C.N. regularly nominates representatives to attend meetings, pertaining to the work of nurses, at United Nations Headquarters. In this way members of the I.C.N. are kept in touch with United Nations activities, and in particular with those activities which are specifically concerned with health and social welfare.

I.C.N. Headquarters, which since 1947 has been in London, maintains an Information Centre on all aspects of nursing; and through this Centre is responsible for collecting information on nursing or on matters related to nursing from all parts of the world and distributing this information to all parts of the world as and when required.

The following organization pattern at I.C.N. Headquarters, facilitates the collection and distribution of relevant material, and enables the I.C.N. to give advice and guidance to its Member Associations and, on request, to other Authorities.

General Administration

Plans are developed at ICN Headquarters for field visits, in response to invitations to give help or guidance; committee meetings, preparations for conferences and congresses, reception of visitors and distribution of professional material are other activities.

The I.C.N. concerns itself with the promotion and development of professional organization at the national level, and in this way supports and strengthens

the nursing profession in the management of its own affairs and its relationships with other health and welfare organizations as well as with the general public.

National Nurses' Associations seeking membership with the I.C.N. are required to complete a questionnaire entitled "Criteria for Evaluating Eligibility for Membership" a copy of which is attached to this paper as Annex 1.

Division of Nursing Service

The aim of this Division is to encourage and maintain the highest standards of nursing practice in all fields of nursing. In an attempt to regularize these standards, the Division is currently carrying out a study on nursing legislation, which includes the assembling of laws pertaining to nursing from those countries where legislation has already been enacted.

Subsequent to this study, an attempt will be made to establish sound principles for the guidance of those countries which are attempting to draft a nursing law, or to bring about changes in existing legislation.

The Division of Nursing Service is also concerned with needs and resources in nursing, and recognizes the importance of establishing right relationships between auxiliary and professional nursing personnel. In this connexion the Division is carrying out a preliminary investigation into the functions of existing auxiliary nursing personnel; after which an attempt will be made to define the functions of the professional nurse, and this in turn should precede a study of the preparation of both groups.

Division of Nursing Education

This Division maintains an Information Centre on all aspects of nursing education, and offers an advisory educational service to National Nurses' Associations; as well as to other organizations seeking advice on professional nursing matters, and to individual nurses.

Research in nursing education is promoted, and is from time to time conducted through studies and conferences sponsored by the staff of the Nursing Education Division.

Department of Information on Professional Qualifications

The Department assists in clarifying the credentials of nurses seeking employment outside their own countries so that they may be accorded comparable status in the country of employment. These nurses may be applying for temporary employment for the purpose of enriching their experience; or for permanent

employment after the necessary formalities of immigration and registration have been complied with. Many of these nurses are refugees from their own countries; the I.C.N. maintains a professional register of some 4,000 refugee nurses whose credentials have been established, and is thereby able to assist them with personal and professional problems.

Department of Publications and Public Relations

In the field of communications the I.C.N. has a responsibility for spreading knowledge on nursing and on new trends in nursing on a world-wide basis amongst its members, and also for assisting National Nurses' Associations to bring before the general public a true picture of the nurses' contribution to the health and well-being of the community. These objectives the I.C.N. attempts to achieve through the publication of an international journal, the International Nursing Review, which is published every two months; the distribution of a monthly News Letter; and the appointment of press officers and of editorial consultants in all countries where the National Nurses' Association is in membership.

Various other publications concerned with nursing education and nursing service are from time to time produced by the I.C.N., and a list of those currently available is attached as Annex 2.

Economic Welfare

The I.C.N. has laid down policies on economic conditions for nurses which require that conditions of service should give full recognition to the status and responsibilities of nurses and their work.

The I.C.N. considers that National Nurses' Associations should be adequately represented in the negotiation of salaries and conditions of service for nurses, and that negotiations should be carried out through properly constituted machinery on which both employing bodies and nurses are equally represented. Assistance in setting up such machinery may be requested by Member Associations from ICN Headquarters.

It appears to the I.C.N. that in many countries there exist inadequate opportunities for general education, a poor social status of nursing related to the low status of women, and inadequate remuneration of nursing personnel arising from limited financial resources. All of these obstacles may be related to a lack of understanding on the part of health and education departments in a country, of the needs of nursing and of the vital part the profession should play in improving the health and welfare of the community.

The I.C.N., with its sixty years of experience in professional organization, is pledged to assist Member Associations in the overcoming of these obstacles, and in interpreting to the authorities the value of a strong nursing profession.

To quote from the Report on the First Session of the Expert Committee on Nursing of the World Health Organization: "In countries where medicine is highly developed and nursing is not, the health status of the people does not reflect the advanced stage of medicine... Nursing is essential to the vitalization of the health programme."

What then, is the value of a National Nursing Association to the community, and of the International Council of Nurses to a National Association? The answer to this is challenging and difficult - challenging because the value is more in moral and spiritual strength than in material advantages; difficult because we live in an age which is "Association minded."

Organizations are forming and multiplying like "mushrooms" both nationally and internationally. Professions and trades and sects and bands of craftsmen in different spheres of work, both religious and secular, are increasingly banding themselves together, thereby demonstrating a common interest.

But again, what is their value, for obviously there is some value when so many people in so many walks of life have the same idea - and it is not always easy to prove the value of what seems obvious.

To quote from "Issues in the Growth of a Profession" by Robert K. Merton, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, Columbia University, "The issues confronting a profession converge on one great issue: the decision to guide the profession toward the enlarged achievement of human purposes that enjoy the respect of man"; and later, "A profession and its professional association must be unendingly engaged in pressing for higher standards of personnel, education, research and practice, and this means that it is committed to dissatisfaction with things as they are".

If the I.C.N. is experiencing a feeling of dissatisfaction in what it has itself been able to accomplish on behalf of its world-wide membership, it is, perhaps, because we live in an age of scientific advances which affect the future, even our own future as a profession. But advance in knowledge and methods of treatment do not solve all health problems, and these achievements are of no service to humanity unless they make human life richer and fuller. Perhaps the nursing profession can help to show the way in which this may be achieved,

As a profession we have a long history and great traditions, and with the knowledge that there is still much work for us to do, the I.C.N. is confident of the future, as it is justly proud of the past.

To work in the field of health means disregarding the narrow limits of national boundaries, for every nation, by promoting its own health and sharing its discoveries, adds to the better health of other nations. As nurses, and with our great international heritage, we can work towards this ultimate ideal, realizing that the world is growing smaller every day, and we are growing nearer and nearer to each other. This has been brought about by rapid and spectacular developments in modern transport and communication. We must therefore be prepared to share our interests and problems with the nurses of other countries, as they, on their part, should be prepared to share theirs with us; and it is the professional "machinery" which has been built up by the nurses of many countries through half a century - National Nurses' Associations linked to an International Association - which has provided the opportunities through which we can more easily share our interests and problems with each other.

Briefly to summarize what the I.C.N. claims to do for its Member Associations:-

Any nurse who is in good standing with her own National Nurses' Association, which in turn is in membership with the I.C.N., may benefit from the many activities carried out by the I.C.N.;

She may obtain advice or assistance through I.C.N. Headquarters, and may draw on the resources of the I.C.N. Information Centre;

She is in direct relationship with the United Nations and its Specialized Agencies, and in particular with those Specialized Agencies dealing with health and economic and social welfare;

She is made aware, through I.C.N. publications, of developments in nursing and nursing education in all parts of the world;

She may visit other countries for study, employment or observation through the I.C.N. Exchange of Privileges programme;

She may attend International Congresses and Conferences sponsored by the I.C.N., and thereby share her interests and problems with nurses from all parts of the world.

Through her membership in the ICN she is given the opportunity to promote international friendship and fellowship; and may help to contribute towards the fulfilment of a prophecy of a great reformer, Arnold Toynbee, who wrote: "The twentieth century will be chiefly remembered not as an age of political conflict or of technical inventions, but as an age in which human society dared to think of the welfare of the whole human race as a practical objective."