Educating Nurses in Political Process: A Growing Need
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ABSTRACT
If we are to advance the profession of nursing, we must educate nurses to become key participants in the formulation of health policy. If we fail to do this, others will make decisions that affect our practice without our input. A growing number of nurses are recognizing the need to increase our power, and we understand that political participation provides a pathway to power. We must continue to increase the number of nurses who are politically astute and active in order to achieve our goal. The most effective way to accomplish this is to educate large numbers of staff nurses for this vital role. This article suggests educational strategies and methods that can be utilized in continuing education programs to begin the political education process.

Although it might seem an unlikely topic for continuing education, teaching nurses to increase their political awareness and involvement is an area of growing need. Many practice issues and issues that threaten our profession make it vital for nurses to be unified and knowledgeable in political process. To appreciate the importance for nurses to be actively involved in formulating legislation that affects the health care delivery system, nurses need only to consider the effects of diagnosis related groups (DRGs) or the potential effects of the recently proposed Registered Care Technologists (RCTs) within the health care delivery system.

Increasingly, critical policy decisions are being made either legislatively or judicially that will have direct and significant impact on nursing practice. Recent examples include quality-of-life issues, as reflected in the Nancy Cruzan case, and the introduction of laws regarding living wills. Legislation related to AIDS testing and/or confidentiality of HIV-related information will also have a potential impact on the practice of nursing. In addition, legislative initiatives that might affect the personal as well as the professional lives of nurses require our attention. The proposed Family and Medical Leave Act, for example, would allow either spouse to take time off from work to care for a newborn or adopted infant, or to provide care for an aging relative without fear of a job loss.

Finally, the scope of our nursing practice can be altered by changes in the rules and regulations of many of our State Boards of Nursing. Thus, if nurses are to control our own destiny and shape the future of nursing, we must become involved in health policy decisions. If we refuse to become involved in the legislative and political arenas where decisions are made, others will determine our policy for us.

Nurses have long been known to serve as patient advocates. Many nurses are becoming more aware of the need to participate in policy decision-making at both institutional and governmental levels. In addition to the legislative committees of the professional nursing organizations and certain specialty organizations, we are beginning to see the formation of nursing-based government relations committees within hospitals. Such content is also beginning to be incorporated into the education of nurses within academic settings. While all of these are positive indicators, the need is great to educate as many nurses as possible in order to actualize the potential power we hold within our ranks. It is here that continuing education can make a vital contribution.

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Figure 1
Initial Education in Political Action

Assess participants:
- Attitudes regarding power and politics
- Present knowledge and past political experience
- Concerns about political involvement or participation

Plan for:
- Strategies to foster awareness of politics as a positive force for change
- Ways to demystify stereotypes, fears, and misconceptions
- Methods to build on nurses' strengths and skills
- Adequate time to allow for participation of staff
- Exploration of current issues

ESTABLISHING THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT—DEFINING THE NEED

To provide education regarding political process and action, it is necessary to establish the fact that the need for such education exists and that nurses "can make a difference." Helping nurses to overcome the attitude that we are powerless, and that one person's voice does not count, is also necessary. We must recognize that we possess professional expertise and therefore hold power (hereafter referred to as "expert power") in our knowledge of patient care and in many facets of health care delivery in our present system. Staff nurses must also be convinced that there are issues that will directly or indirectly have an effect on their practice. Thus, it is essential that the first sessions presented be process oriented. Initial classes should focus on examining power as it relates to nursing and also on exploring current issues. This will involve considering the fact that the profession remains primarily composed of women (97%), and will require an examination of women's orientation to power and their process of socialization.

One effective strategy for approaching this content is the use of an assessment tool (Goldwater & Lloyd Zisuy, 1990) that provides an inventory of each nurse's political astuteness, followed by a discussion of why some nurses are more politically aware or active than others. This can also be accomplished through group discussions concerning the nurses' perceptions of politics or by having a presentation by an existing group of nurses that have been involved in political process.

The initial process of educating nurses for effective political involvement must also demystify several false notions. One pervasive myth is that political figures are unapproachable. Clearly, once one recognizes that elected officials are public servants and that most of them do respond to the concerns of constituents, the fear associated with initiating contact is diminished. Legislators want to hear from their nursing constituents and regard nurses as having expert power within the health care arena. Some suggested strategies to reinforce this message include:
- Present videotapes that portray the message of legislators (e.g., the American Nurses' Association [ANA] video, "Nurses, Politics, and Public Policy").
- Speak with nurses who have frequent contact with their own legislators.
- Invite an elected official to speak with the group.

An additional consideration during the assessment and planning phase (Figure 1) is the exploration of a current issue or issues that are either of general or specific interest to nursing. This is important because most people will only become interested in political action when it is relevant for them. Providing specific ways to help staff identify issues will help to guide this effort. For national issues it is helpful to read the Washington Commentary in The American Nurse, the news section of the American Journal of Nursing, or the legislative commentaries in Nursing and Health Care. The newsletters of state nursing associations also may provide a legislative update or a bill worksheet on a monthly basis. Many specialty groups also have government relations committees that publish information on current nursing issues.

PROVIDING CONTENT AND EXPERIENCE

As with any nursing skill, knowledge and the opportunity to practice are critical elements in the development of political skills. However, as Diers (1986) points out, this skill development is not the same as learning procedures, but rather a process of discovery learning. A first step in the discovery learning process is for those nurses who have not been politically astute to be assisted in learning who their legislators and other elected or appointed officials are at the local, state, and national levels. Nurses who lack this knowledge should be assisted in developing a list of their individual legislators and/or the legislators who represent the interest of the particular hospital, agency, or institution where they are employed. Such information is often available from printed listings or may be obtained by calling the League of Women Voters or respective county election offices. Nurses within the group who have had experience in political matters should be encouraged to share their experiences with the group and to assist those who feel less at ease with the process. There may be nurses who have little need of this content because of previous experience. In contrast, some may need to be encouraged and assisted to become registered to vote.

Other relevant content will include a review of legislative structure and process. Consideration should be given to the structures of both federal and state
government. Inclusion of information related to local governmental structures and functions will depend on available time and potential interest to participants. If, for example, the disposal of medical waste is a vital issue for a hospital in a specific community, nurses might wish to consider involvement in policy decisions through participation in local politics. Content related to legislative process should include:

- how bills are introduced in the legislature,
- bill sponsorship,
- committee functions, and
- the points where nursing input is most valuable.

If possible, having attendees review a current piece of legislation with implications for nursing, or a law that was previously passed, will facilitate learning.

At the federal level, the Bill Status Office provides current information about bills in the House or Senate; including date of introduction, sponsors and cosponsors, scheduled committee hearings, and where the bill is in the legislative process (Bagwell & Clements, 1985). Copies of bills currently under consideration may generally be obtained from the Document Room.

At the state level, contacting the office of the Secretary of State can provide information about obtaining copies of specific bills. Bill copies can also generally be obtained by contacting a legislator’s office. Making requests for information on a bill, or for a bill copy, can serve as a good way to move participants into another important experience: communicating with a legislator. Personal contact with a legislator and/or the legislative staff is one of the most effective ways to promote our individual as well as nursing’s concerns. This contact might include having participants make personal visits, either individually or in a group, or simply make phone calls. It could also include having the participants write letters expressing their views on a particular issue or piece of legislation.

Although this type of learning assignment might seem too time-consuming for staff, the results are well worth the effort. As nurses actually get to meet their legislators, or receive personal letters thanking them for their opinions, a new enthusiasm for learning more about this process and becoming more involved often ensues. Reinforcing the value of political activity by demonstrating that nurses have actually made a difference is important at this point.

If nurses in a state nursing association have been successful in influencing the passage of some important legislation, such as Third Party Payment for Nurses, having a speaker on the subject might be helpful. Another strategy that serves this purpose is the selection of audiovisuals that form the basis for discussion of the topic. One example of a useful video is the National League for Nursing (NLN) videotape, “A Case Study in Shaping Health Policy,” which portrays a major success for nursing, i.e., the establishment of the National Center for Nursing Research at the National Institutes of Health. Other potentially useful audiovisuals and other resources are detailed by McGivern (1986).

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Content related to the need for and effectiveness of lobbying efforts by nurses will flow naturally from the introductory material. Information on lobbying should include various methods and tips for effective lobbying efforts, such as letter writing. In addition, the role of professional nurse lobbyists in protecting the interests of nurses and promoting a nursing agenda should be considered. As Goldwater and Lloyd Zysy (1990) point out, professional nurse-lobbyists have gained increased visibility both in Washington and in the state legislatures in recent years. In Washington, many of these lobbyists are employed by the ANA or other national nursing organizations. Many state nursing associations as well as specialty organizations are now hiring lobbyists to represent them at the state level.

Reviewing the efforts of nurse lobbyists within the state can be a helpful learning experience. According to Long and Mason (1985), “the state government is an important political arena for nurses because of the shift in power from the federal government to the states... and its jurisdiction over the professions” (p. 549). They further conclude that state nurses' associations are the primary means for nurses to develop and exercise their political power in this regard. Since the political activity of most nurses takes place at the state level, a brief introduction to the legislative role of the state nurses' associations and their particular publications that provide updates of current legislative issues would be helpful content. A speaker from the nursing association or a member of the local legislative committee could provide such information.

If nurses in the work setting belong to their state association, perhaps they might be willing to participate. Nurse members of specialty groups, such as the Emergency Nurses Association or the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists, which have active government relations committees, might also be willing to share their experiences with the group. If time permits, other considerations for providing a basic understanding of legislative and political activity would be providing information on the role of political action committees (PACs), nursing involvement in campaign activities or running for public office oneself, and the nurse's role in preparing and giving testimony.
Figure 2
Continuing the Political Education Process

Implementation of the plan:
- Invite individual and staff participation
- Provide for small group work sessions
- Create strategies for experiential or discovery learning
- Provide essential knowledge
- Promote learning through political activities

Evaluation:
- Determine changes in staff knowledge and attitudes
- Report numbers of legislative contacts made and results of staff efforts
- Survey intent of nurses to continue some form of political involvement
- Count requests for future educational programming related to political action

PRAGMATIC AND EDUCATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS
Clearly the development of an educational program to introduce nurses to the area of political action is a task that requires a great deal of creativity, coordination, and commitment. Since much of the material suggested requires experiential or discovery learning (Figure 2), time is a major consideration. Ideally, scheduling small groups (10 to 20 participants) every other week over a period of 8 weeks or longer allows sufficient time to explore issues, complete assigned tasks, and contact legislators.

Sessions should be at least 1 1/2 to 2 hours long to allow for sufficient discussion and debate of issues. Further, if no one in the continuing education department is knowledgeable in this area, personal commitment and/or departmental resources may be needed to prepare one or two staff members who value this content and the potential impact of this education on the profession. One suggested method for such beginning preparation might be attendance at a policy development workshop held in Washington, D.C. by the ANA or one of the specialty nursing organizations. Additionally, time and commitment will be necessary to learn the resources available in one's state or local area. Although it may not be an easy task, the benefits and excitement created as nurses begin to actualize some of their potential power is well worth the time and effort.

SUMMARY
Commitment is the key to providing effective political education. Nurse educators who teach or facilitate the learning process must be convinced that while we may not always be satisfied with the way the system works, we can begin to work to make significant changes within the system. Learning how slowly and painstakingly change occurs within our political system is often frustrating for nurses oriented to action and outcome. These concerns need to be addressed. Perhaps only the role modeling and enthusiasm of instructors or of other nurses who have been able to make changes will provide hope to staff that change within the profession and the health care system is really possible. Then through our efforts they may come to know that nurses really can make a difference. The future of our profession and the care of our patients depend upon it!

REFERENCES