

Tributes to Nurses

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ACEN Salutes RNs

While the celebrations are likely now over, when I submitted this column National Nurses Week was just beginning (May 12–18). The week began by marking International Nurses' Day on May 12. In January 1974, the International Council of Nurses (ICN) proclaimed that May 12 – the birthday of Florence Nightingale – would be International Nurses Day. The ICN, a federation of 124 national nurses' associations representing millions of nurses worldwide since 1899, is the international voice of nursing, and works to ensure quality care for all and sound health policies globally. Its theme for International Nurses Day ("Nurses: Fighting AIDS Stigma, Caring for All") reminds us of the devastating reality of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the denial of basic rights – such as food and shelter, the right to work and live in dignity – that millions of those afflicted with AIDS experience

daily. Nurses worldwide, along with physicians and other groups, are leading the way in breaking down the walls of stigma and silence. We salute their courage, expertise and compassion!

At the national level, the Canadian Nurses Association chose the theme of "Nursing: At the Heart of Health Care." This theme highlights the central role that Canada's nurses play in the country's healthcare system and in its reform. It is worth remembering that nurses were the only healthcare professional group who collectively and heartily endorsed the introduction of medicare. And during the current era of upheaval and renewal of our national health system, the voices of nurses have again been heard all across this country, whether through the federal commissions (Romanow, Kirby) or at the provincial and regional level, in the many reviews being conducted. ACEN's response to the prime minister, the provincial premiers and the

territorial leaders on the new health accord was featured in the last issue of this journal.

ACEN wishes to salute the dedication, commitment and excellence of the registered nurses of this country. Your leadership and compassion are evident everywhere – when you skillfully assess and manage pain, prepare families for the challenges of living with chronic illness or disability, conduct studies on the outcomes of psychosocial interventions, call a worried relative with an update on a loved one's status in intensive care or successfully negotiate budgets for nursing units that will ensure adequate caregiving personnel, resources and workplace improvements.

Anton Hart, publisher of Longwoods, recently wrote that we don't give out enough medals in this country. He is right. Fortunately, many medals, plaques and bouquets were given during May 12–18, 2003, to countless nurses who went the extra mile, took on one more challenge and, with vision and passion, made a difference – 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Be proud of the quality work you provide to promote the health and well being of this nation.

The Heroic Ones: SARS

Heroes are defined as persons endowed with great courage and strength, noted for bravery and courageous action when facing danger (*American Heritage Dictionary*). The citizens, healthcare professionals and hospital staff of Toronto (and, to a lesser degree, other cities) have faced

unbelievable challenges in the last two months of the SARS outbreak. You are heroes in the truest sense of the word.

In North American healthcare delivery, we take many things for granted. Despite cutbacks and the relative chaos associated with mergers and restructuring, we assume that we are reasonably skilled at diagnosis, treatment and prevention. Most of us in Canada also go to work each day safe in the knowledge that our workplaces have adequate quality assurance and risk management programs in place to protect our own health as care providers to the ill. But the intrusion by SARS has served as a wake-up call and reminded us that we are not invulnerable, and that being a nurse (or physician, or support worker) is inherently risky.

The collective lack of familiarity with and knowledge about this latest biological interloper has posed significant risks to the health of the Canadian population, and yet as nurses you have been there to provide direct care, screen and refer, offer support to families hit by SARS and to your colleagues, move to unfamiliar work locations and forgo normal freedoms, such as being able to bring food into your work area and even asking questions. Nursing administrators have similarly been deluged with demands for

- prompt action, even when the “correct” directions were unknown
- massive reorganization of resources
- formation of new relationships with public health personnel
- establishment of a new and complicated chain of command in order to

- make decisions rapidly and effectively
- communication and psychological support to worried staff and the public
- assessment of the enormous economic impact of containing this disease (so much for this year's budget!).

All this has required enormous courage, spirit, humour and valour. Your work has been successful in more ways than the extraordinary containment of this disease. You have observed carefully, recorded valuable data, identified new issues related to managing infectious diseases, discovered problems and solutions in disaster management that only lived experience can bring and learned how to get through each day. And now, we will listen as you teach us what you have learned.

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