
VIEWPOINT

The Alberta nurses' strike

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WARE ALL AWARE THAT THE MILITANT ALBERTA NURSES recently carried out what is euphemistically called a 'job action' against the Alberta Hospital Association and the population of that province. Their action was illegal since in 1984, nurses, along with members of other essential service groups such as firemen and policemen, were prohibited by law to 'withdraw services' (another euphemism for strike). Despite the prohibition, the nurses walked out of their hospitals and picketed for 19 days defying the law and subarctic conditions.

Although they were levied with heavy fines, they 'won' the strike by agreeing to return to the bedside, after negotiating a small pay increase. The prime reason for their action was because they did not wish to accept a pay decrease. Other demands, such as better working conditions and a stronger input into patient care, were left floating about in some indistinct bureaucratic limbo. No doubt these evanescent ghostly conditions will resurface when the present contract expires.

Many practical and philosophical questions have arisen from this event. Questions such as — should nurses be allowed to strike? Should nurses indeed have more input into the daily management of their patients? Should nurses be 'allowed' to shed their mantle of the physician's handmaiden, and take what they consider to be their rightful role as health care professionals?

Surely the answer must be a qualified 'yes' to all of these questions.

There is no reason why nurses should not go on strike if all of their methods of obtaining what they consider to be their proper financial rewards fail. After all, doctors in this country have done so and other essential workers — postal workers, food industry workers and grain handlers to cite just a few. One could suggest that the reason the prohibition on nurses was so severe is that it is directly related to the fact that nursing is predominantly a female profession; that is to say that the interdiction is antifeminist in origin. This idea is not my own. Many nurses to whom I have talked are convinced that this is indeed the case.

We should not ignore the impact of the feminist movement or revolution on the nursing profession. It has indeed been the subject of much discussion in the past 20 years. There is 'no aura of mystery' about the suggestion that nurses are being discriminated against because they are women.

PATIENT MANAGEMENT

There is no doubt in my own mind that nurses should have more direct input into the management of patients. They certainly have the training, and indeed in some areas are more expert than most physicians.

No intensive care unit, coronary care unit, dialysis unit or indeed endoscopy unit could function without nurses. On the general wards, they have infinitely more contact with patients than we physicians and yet have little say regarding management. Sadly, there appears to be less contact between doctors and ward nurses in recent years than in the past. This is likely related to the antagonism of the nurses to the glory heaped upon physicians, while they, the nurses, are virtually ignored. Perhaps the feminist ethic is at work here, as well as the tradition that some physicians still consider nurses as servants, a position that is antiquated and totally archaic.

It is true that the time has come for the nursing profession to be recognized for what it is — a profession. This recognition must be accepted by the piper that plays the tune. Nurses should be compensated far more adequately than they are at present and if that requires another method of medicare funding, then so be it. If this does not happen we are likely to lose many of our excellent nurses.

In addition, the nurses themselves must insist on professional standards and enforce them among their own ranks. If they are to be a true profession, as they seem to desire, they must accept the fact that they cannot work for hourly wages for indeed they will not have specified hours of work. They will shoulder an equal share of responsibility for the care of their patients in conjunction with the physician and be

reviewed as physicians are in hospitals, and be ready to be criticized if their management is inadequate.

A profession is unfortunately not all roses — it is, therefore, a challenge that the nurses will have to accept and will have to work towards achieving their goal of a profession.

Finally, we physicians must accept nurses as equals and in doing so help them to achieve their rightful place in the medical hierarchy, right up there with the doctors.

Alvin Toffler would view this as another 'third wave phenomenon' and it would be no surprise to him that it is happening. He would also not be astounded if the transition from handmaiden to professional is achieved without considerable struggle. However, as we all know, nothing of value is achieved without struggle.

