

Editorial: Nursing alumni building a strong voice for the future

As registered nurses we have received a sound nursing education, of which we are proud. 'Self-directed learning', 'critical thinking', 'problem-based learning', and 'making a difference' – do these phrases ring a bell? They characterised our nursing student lives and they continue to mould the hallmark traits of skill, intelligence and critical thinking for which many nursing graduates are valued.

Most of us have at least some fond memories of our respective nursing schools, and our initial nurse education, irrespective of whether it was hospital or university based. In reflecting on her days as a nursing student, Joan Chi-Ching Lim recalls:

It seems like only yesterday, when I reminisce about the past, and a smile will never fail to come on my face.... I can still remember clearly the gang of us banging our brains together outside the library, desperately trying to memorise the different classes of antibiotics. Non-verbal communication is a crucial nursing skill, and I half-suspect that we mastered it while trying to read the Professors mind for questions that might pop out on that pharmacology test. Many lifelong friendships were forged during these good old times; friendships that we treasure even more as we left the University. These are experiences that we share, having come from the same educational background and university life. They resonate in our hearts and minds.

There are many people who consider nursing to be the 'backbone' of health-care care delivery with an estimated 13 million nurses working in clinics, hospitals, communities and other diverse settings around the world (International

Council of Nurses 2009). If this is the case then 'strengthening of the back' is a task of uncontestable importance. One way of strengthening nursing is through the development of nursing alumni.

The idea of nursing alumni is rather new to many of us in nursing. The word 'alumni' refers to graduates of a particular school or university, and is developed from the original Latin verb *alere*: to nourish or help to grow (The Latin noun *alumnus* means 'foster son, pupil' and is derived from the verb *alere* 'to nourish') (Merriam-Webster dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alumnus>; accessed 11 December 2011). As nursing continues to develop its identity in the university sector, there is an increasing interest in the concept of alumni and its potential to facilitate the continued growth of the discipline, and to nurture and support new nurses. Indeed, it is important to cultivate in ourselves a sense of *noblesse oblige* towards novice nurses. This idea of kindly benevolence to our students, beginning nurses and nurse colleagues can take its roots during the early undergraduate years and be shaped by early experiences of professional generosity from more senior and experienced nurses (Jackson 2008). The need to have a mechanism to continue to support our new nurses is why we believe in the importance of being involved in nursing alumni. Learning to work together and helping each other to grow and develop is of central importance, as we are reliant on teamwork and collaboration in clinical practice, teaching and research.

Nursing alumni is a platform that enables nurses to continue to connect and reconnect with peers and students. Through participation as alumni, we can come together to share and relive our memories, and reignite our passions

and aspirations for patients, for nursing, for healthcare, for students and for ourselves. Nursing alumni is also a united banner through which we can organise activities to support each other's interests, or campaign for causes close to our hearts. By virtue of our numbers and the important role we play in the health care sector, nurses have the capacity to be a powerful lobby group. Unfortunately, we do not always use our capacity to positively influence outcomes as effectively as we might, and therefore lack the same level of political influence of other professions. Failure to use collective power may be a significant contributing factor. Involvement as alumni can be a way of organising collective power.

The key to success for any alumni group lies in the participation of every nursing graduate. Not only can alumni give generously of their time and expertise to support important causes in the Department and the University, alumni also have an important role to play in areas such as volunteerism and leadership. This is especially so given that many graduates are actively contributing at various levels in the major hospitals and institutions and advancing clinical practice, research and policy. Often these nurses were at one stage student leaders while studying, and it is immensely rewarding to see them continue to develop their leadership skills through nursing alumni activities. That said, to have an active nursing alumni, enormous support and hard work is required and that includes commitment of all alumni and faculty, colleagues and current students, who are the next generation of graduates.

Alumni can help with building new and updated academic programmes and in the application of advancements in

nursing education and research. Many of you reading this editorial will have a wealth of experiences to share that can guide and contribute to nursing alumni. It can be helpful to consider the following 'Five Hows':

- 1 How can we preserve and strengthen the camaraderie among alumni through shared intellectual and social ties?
- 2 How can we create a platform for alumni to participate actively in social causes to reflect the potential power and influence of the nursing profession?
- 3 How can we enhance interaction between alumni and nursing undergraduates through lifelong learning and mentorship schemes?
- 4 How can we promote University nursing education as an institution of choice for quality nursing education and research?
- 5 How can we enhance societal impact of nursing through collaborative international actions?

A final word – some would say that the best is yet to be. Visionary and supportive nurse leaders are important in nursing and many nursing alumni are proud to have among them the highest leaders of the nursing profession, including clinical leaders, administrators, researchers, educators and advanced practice nurses who challenge current boundaries, create new knowledge, and form policies to improve the quality of patient care and nursing standards. In

fact, alumni have been referred to as the third pillar of the University community – the other two pillars are faculty and students (Tan 2011).

The visibility and image of nursing and its impact on society is questioned by critical thinkers from time-to-time. Strong nursing alumni are a key platform that has the potential to reinforce the important contribution of nursing. Thus, it is important to consider how we can further strengthen nursing alumni – so that the nursing faculties can become the great and locally and internationally influential departments that they aspire to be.

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