DIVERSITY IS a topic frequently discussed in nursing administrative circles. Administrators recognize that the profession must reflect a variety of ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds to provide care to the wide (and growing) diversity of our patients. They understand that few individuals are comfortable entering an arena where they seldom see someone who looks like them, but efforts to address diversity are fraught with challenges. Nonetheless, many nursing leaders are working to overcome the obstacles to full participation of minorities in the profession.

Recruiting faculty and students from diverse backgrounds is a constant challenge complicated by long-established traditions and a largely all-white, all-female staff. Nursing, for the most part, seems genuinely committed to changing the face of our workforce. Improving cultural sensitivity, at the one end, and encouraging potential recruits at the other, have been moderately successful in some institutions in increasing the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in our schools of nursing and, ultimately, in our workforce.

Just as racial and ethnic diversity is essential for nursing's future, so is gender diversity. Yet, the lack of sexual diversity in nursing is rarely discussed. We wait for men to apply for admission to nursing schools and when they stay away, we figuratively shrug our shoulders at their lack of interest. Conversely, medical and law schools have been successful in attracting women when they examined their admission and progression policies and actively recruited women. Nursing, alas, has seldom addressed gender diversity and, thus, the numbers of men in nursing has remained correspondingly low.

The absence of men in nursing's workforce, however, is a phenomenon only in some countries. In Jordan, for example, a dean of a nursing school reports that 95% of her students are men, the exact reverse of that in the United States. Cultural reasons account for this difference. Women are discouraged from seeing, much less touching, men's bodies. Also, men must have a good job before marrying and having a family, and nursing offers many professional opportunities. In some European countries (The Netherlands comes to mind), men are also more commonly found in nursing's ranks. Recognizing and accommodating differences, gender as well as race and culture, is essential for nursing as we move toward a more global profession.

So what keeps a Western country like the United States from achieving gender diversity in nursing? Are the same factors at work in regard to gender as they are with race and ethnicity? Is discrimination against men in nursing unspoken, unacknowledged, and, thus, unchanged?

Discrimination in Recruiting and Retaining Men

The most insidious discrimination occurs when the person is unaware of the discrimination or when the discrimination is so subtle as to be explained away as a sensitive person's imaginings. Let me give you some examples. A young man, a nursing student, who agreed with his male colleagues that they had experienced no discrimination in their educational program (this said to the dean), related his experience in OB nursing. After completing the clinical rotation, his instructor told him to return to the nursery to repeat a well-baby check. When he asked her if he had performed anything incorrectly, she said he had not but that she just thought he should do another one. He did so without complaining although he missed...
the end of class party. Another student told about one instructor who began postconference while students were changing clothes in the locker room. When the women emerged, he was told they had finished with postconference and he should ask one of the women students about what had been said. In neither case did the student complain, nor did the instructors think they had done anything wrong.

Women have insisted (rightly so) on equality in many professions. The persuasive argument for women's involvement in traditionally all-male professions, organizational life, the corporate world, and policy making was that when women were excluded, half of our existing talent was unavailable. Similarly, men in nursing should have equal opportunities to contribute to nursing. Sadly, this is not always the case.

Discrimination in Promoting Men

Complicating the issue of gender discrimination for men in nursing is the reality that nursing is one profession that enabled women to use the full range of their abilities to achieve success and to advance in the profession and beyond (Porter-O'Grady, 1998). If men are to be accorded equal opportunity, some ask, would women lose their competitive advantage? Porter-O'Grady suggests that because men comprise less than 5 per cent of the nursing population, any significant erosion of women's opportunities in nursing is unlikely in the near future. In the meantime, the talents of many men go untapped.

Wherever and whenever discrimination exists, it must be eliminated. This is not easy; powerful forces mitigate against change. Changing collective behavior in a profession or society demands awareness of the current behavior and the effect of behavior on the larger group.

Traditional nursing organizations foster collegiality among their members using symbols, language, and behavior common to each other. Because most members are women, these characteristics tend to be feminine in nature. This forces men to either be uncomfortable or to stay away. A man in an organization selling T-shirts was asked if he would wear one in the color presented. He admitted he would not. Few women had even thought about the color being inappropriate for men. Of course, women who have achieved positions of influence have dealt with these subtle, as well as not so subtle, messages. Endless Monday-morning quarterback discussions are an example. But that is not a reason to force men in nursing to accept such discrimination.

Just as improving cultural and racial diversity requires action, achieving gender diversity also requires a proactive approach, addressing both the internal organization and the external recruitment of men. First, the institution (health care organization, school of nursing, professional association) must become sensitive to the subtle, and not so subtle, ways that men are made to feel excluded. These characteristics must be changed to be gender-neutral. Then actions to promote participation by men must be undertaken. Continual assessment of the effectiveness of these efforts helps identify successful and not so successful strategies. The organization's motto must be “if one activity doesn't work, try another.” Failure must be seen as a challenge, not an excuse.

The diversity of talent, expertise, and commitment available in nursing is extraordinary. The individual who chooses nursing, a profession demanding physical stamina, intellectual prowess, and a compassionate nature, has the personal and professional resources to care for patients and enrich the profession. None of these talents should be lost or ignored. When nursing does not take advantage of the talents of all of its members, the profession risks losing in important arenas. Anything other than full equality for men in nursing is nothing less than shameful.

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