



Editorial



Nursing – the tipping point is at hand

Although I have never wanted to be a rock star, or even an actor with moderate fame, I got a taste of it. How so? Well, it was my privilege to be invited to deliver a paper at the recent International Council of Nurses 25th Quadrennial Congress in Durban. Wow, the hall was huge and it seemed to be more suited to a rock concert than an august meeting of nurses. Luckily my topic was a professional passion - hypertension and its management by nurses- so I didn't feel too nervous. Once I was given an antidote to speakers nerves, just imagine all your audience is naked and you are the only one with clothes on. Unsurprisingly, I have never found that very helpful because I convulse in fits of laughter and can't speak at all. Well quite frankly, the thought of a thousand or more naked nurses was way more than I could deal with!

All went well and in closing my presentation I helpfully noted that I had placed copies of the hypertension guideline algorithm on the stage. My naive idea was that at the end of the session, following the panel discussion, in thirty minutes the audience could stroll up and collect a copy. Silly me, being the modest type, I had only brought about 200 which was woefully to few for the size of the audience. Never did I think that I could cause a mini-stamped in a quest of the clinical documents. The chairperson called for order to little avail until all the algorithms were gone.

So what has all of that got to do with a tipping point in nursing? Little except by way of illustration. South African nurses attended the ICN Congress in very large numbers and showed an exceptional hunger for knowledge. They showed all the robust signs of a vibrant professional group and hardly a sign of the oppressed, poorly paid and uncaring media image. Things may not always be what they seem. One example is the supposed shortage of nursing to which there has been a rash of articles. I have long resisted supporting this line because a recent report concludes.

Whether or not there is a shortage of nurses in South Africa is a difficult question for which there is no clear answer.

There is clearly a misdistribution of nurses. About 60% of nurses work in the public sector, where they serve 85% of the population. Some provinces are very undersupplied. But whether there is an absolute shortage of nurses has been the subject of much debate and many predictions. (...) However, opinions differ as to the category of nurses needed most.¹

So we can't clearly say we have shortages until we sort out what it is that we want nurses to do. The pressures of looking at the skill sets for professional nurses combined with the changes to nursing education and demands of chronic illnesses such as hiv/aids are inescapable corollaries. When is the pressure going to be enough to bring about sweeping transformation so needed in nursing? When will nursing reach its tipping point? The tipping point is the name given to the one dramatic moment when everything can change all at once.² There is a sense that nursing in South Africa is nearing its tipping point when it will be jolted out of its equilibrium never to be the same again. Gladwell hypothesises three "laws" being necessary to reach the tipping point where social change (read nursing change) behaves like an epidemic: the law of the few (nurse and social leaders); the stickiness factor (structuring the information memorable so it makes a big impact); the power of context (small parts can change the whole context.) I sense we are close to the tipping point, are we ready to accept the change?

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References:

1. **Breier M, Wildschut A, Mggolozana T.** *Nursing in a New Era. The profession and education of nurses in South Africa.* Cape Town : HSRC Press, 2009.
2. **Gladwell, Malcom.** *The tipping poing. How little things can make a big difference.* London: Abacus - Little, Brown Book Group, 2000.