

2020: unleashing the full potential of nursing

In December, the UK's nursing profession will celebrate the centenary of the Nurses Registration Act 1919, which set training and education standards for nursing and introduced regulation of the profession. This milestone nicely segues into 2020, designated by WHO as the first ever international year of the nurse and midwife. 2020 was chosen to honour the 200th anniversary of the birth of Florence Nightingale—nursing's most iconic figure—who cared for soldiers during the Crimean War and established nursing as a respectable profession for women. There is hope now that nurses and midwives, who are the backbone of primary health-care systems worldwide, will at last receive the recognition, support, and development they deserve.

The value of nursing is almost inestimable. Nurses and midwives make up nearly half of the global health workforce, with around 20 million nurses and 2 million midwives worldwide. Working in a wide variety of roles and in many different contexts, nurses are often the first and only health professionals people see for their health-care needs. Nursing is essential to meeting the challenges posed by demographic changes and rising health-care demands. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and respond to humanitarian crises and climate change, among other challenges, whole-of-life care requires a more holistic approach, which nurses are well positioned to deliver. Also, nurses and midwives have a central role in universal health coverage (UHC). Nurse-led clinics could allow rapid and cost-effective expansion of services for non-communicable diseases, advanced nurse practitioners and nurse specialists could strengthen primary care, and nurses could be at the forefront of public health promotion and prevention campaigns and interventions.

Yet, for all its importance, nursing remains underappreciated. Perhaps the biggest barrier that continues to stifle the profession concerns gender and stereotypes. Most nurses are women, and nursing is still viewed by many as women's work and as a soft science, rather than as the highly skilled profession it really is. This perception can also deter men from entering the field. Discrimination exists in the form of low pay and poor working conditions; female nurses are also often overlooked for promotion because of their child-bearing status. Nursing needs to be inclusive of both

men and women and represent ethnic minorities, especially in senior management.

Discussions and research around UHC have centred on design and financing; far less attention has been paid to the health-care workforce. More evidence on the role of nurses in primary care is sorely needed. For example, provision of care by lung nurse specialists has been shown to improve clinical outcomes for patients with lung cancer. Such findings can drive policy makers to strengthen investment in nursing, and cost analyses can help make an economic case for supporting the profession.

Further initiatives are aiming to address nursing gaps. The aptly named Nightingale Challenge will call on every large employer of nurses to provide leadership and development training for young nurses and midwives (aged 35 years and younger) in 2020, so they can have an even more influential role in global health. These nurses will lobby their respective parliaments on important issues of nursing in an event in October, 2020. Also welcome is the Queen's Nursing Institute's new International Community Nursing Observatory, which will use data-driven analysis to understand community nursing and inform health-care service planning and delivery.

Nursing Now—launched in 2018 by Lord Nigel Crisp and Elizabeth Iro to improve health globally by raising the status of nurses and midwives—has been instrumental in advancing the nursing agenda. On World Health Day (April 7, 2020), in collaboration with Nursing Now and the International Council of Nurses, WHO will publish its first-ever *State of the World's Nursing Report*. The report should provide analysis of the nursing workforce in member states and examples of best practice, which hopefully will lead to a global nursing strategy. The year of the nurse will continue into 2021 with the publication of the *State of the World's Midwifery Report*.

These initiatives are laudable, but we are a long way from realising the full value of nursing. If you enhance nursing, you enhance health care. Governments and health systems worldwide should recognise the true potential of nurses. The next 2 years will provide an opportunity to showcase the evidence and impact of what nurses and midwives do and to ensure they are enabled, resourced, and supported to meet the world's health needs. ■ *The Lancet*



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For information from WHO on nursing and midwifery see https://www.who.int/hrh/nursing_midwifery/en/

For the study of how nursing impacts lung cancer outcomes see *Lung Cancer* 2018; 123: 160–65

For the Nightingale Challenge see <https://www.nursingnow.org/nightingale/>

For more on the October, 2020, nursing meeting see <https://florence-nightingale-foundation.org.uk/about/annual-conference/>

For the International Community Nursing Observatory see <https://www.qni.org.uk/>

For more on Nursing Now see <https://www.nursingnow.org/>

For more on the launch of Nursing Now see [Comment Lancet](#) 2018; 391: 920–21