

COMMUNITY
HEALTH NURSES'
INITIATIVES GROUP

CLINICAL NURSE
SPECIALIST
INTEREST GROUP

ONTARIO
NURSING
INFORMATICS
GROUP

DIABETES
NURSING
INTEREST GROUP

RAINBOW NURSING
INTEREST GROUP

THERE ARE

31 INTEREST GROUPS

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH
NURSES INTEREST GROUP

RN FIRST
ASSISTANT
INTEREST
GROUP

TO CHOOSE FROM AT RNAO

WHICH ONE APPEALS TO YOU?

NURSING
STUDENTS
OF ONTARIO

ONTARIO
WOUND CARE
INTEREST GROUP

MATERNAL
CHILD NURSES'
INTEREST GROUP

PROVINCIAL
NURSE EDUCATOR
INTEREST GROUP

NURSING
RESEARCH
INTEREST
GROUP

RNs share stories of networking, professional development and leadership opportunities afforded to those in RNAO's 31 interest groups. **BY LESLEY YOUNG**

NURSING
LEADERSHIP
NETWORK
OF ONTARIO

ONTARIO PERIANESTHESIA
NURSES ASSOCIATION

TELEPRACTICE
NURSING
INTEREST GROUP

ONTARIO
NURSES FOR THE
ENVIRONMENT
INTEREST GROUP

COMPLEMENTARY
THERAPIES NURSES'
INTEREST GROUP

INTERNATIONAL
NURSING
INTEREST GROUP

MEN IN
NURSING
INTEREST
GROUP

GERONTOLOGICAL
NURSING
ASSOCIATION

ONTARIO FAMILY
PRACTICE NURSES

PALLIATIVE
CARE NURSES
INTEREST GROUP

PARISH NURSING
INTEREST GROUP

ONTARIO
ASSOCIATION OF
REHABILITATION
NURSES

MENTAL HEALTH
NURSING
INTEREST GROUP

NURSE
PRACTITIONERS'
ASSOCIATION
OF ONTARIO

INDEPENDENT
PRACTICE
NURSES

ONTARIO CORRECTIONAL
NURSES' INTEREST GROUP

TAMIL NURSES
ASSOCIATION
OF ONTARIO

PEDIATRIC NURSES
INTEREST GROUP

STAFF NURSE
INTEREST
GROUP

Kim Watson is a staff nurse in the emergency department at Hotel-Dieu Grace Hospital in Windsor. She has always had a passion for complementary therapies (CT). As a child, she recalls receiving the healing touch from her grandmother. Later, as an adult, she would turn to CT to recover from a horrible car accident that threatened her career. She defied the prognosis, thanks in part to healing touch therapies such as Reiki, and returned to work in a hospital environment within four years of the accident.

But being a proponent of non-traditional health therapies was sometimes an isolating and challenging experience for Watson. That is, until she joined RNAO's Complementary Therapies Nurses' Interest Group (CTNIG) in 2004. The CTNIG is one of 31 RNAO interest groups, each one representing a unique specialty or population within the profession. These groups offer RNAO members an incredible range of professional and personal resources and support, as well as exclusive career development opportunities.

Similar to thousands of other RNAO members, Watson says part of the reason she joined RNAO was to come together with like-minded nurses by joining CTNIG. "Most of my career, people saw me as weird. They would call me the 'witch nurse,'" she says, adding that she never took it personally. "The CTNIG connected me with hundreds of other nurses who recognize how important it is to incorporate and integrate CT into nursing and health care in Ontario."

Today, as Watson embarks on a two-year stint as CTNIG president, she says she envisions her career blossoming. This is because the RNAO interest group infrastructure (administration and communications is handled by RNAO staff) allows volunteer nurses to take on leadership roles that will not only advance their career, but will allow them to advocate for their specialty in a way that will make a difference.

With 757 members, Watson has some lofty goals for the next few years. "Part of my vision is to fire (members) up and get them promoting the practice of CT as part of a holistic approach to nursing practice," she explains, conceding she "...can't do this alone."

Of course not all RNAO members have leadership aspirations. But there's something for everyone in the array of interest groups. Nurses can meet peers across a wide array of sectors,

STUDENTS CONNECT WITH RN COLLEAGUES

Students who join RNAO automatically become members of the Nursing Students of Ontario (NSO) interest group. Through their membership, they benefit from career counseling, financial assistance and discounts on conference and workshop registration. They also gain:

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT — In addition to workshops hosted by RNAO, NSO hosts an annual conference to help build students' leadership and communication skills. Participants also learn how to develop (AGM) resolutions based on a specific theme. "They learn how to collaborate," says former NSO president and Trent University student Sumi Shanmuganathan, adding these are all skills that are critical in the workplace.

ADVOCACY — NSO collaborates with other student groups (i.e. Students for Medicare) to advocate on specific health-care issues. Past-President Poonam Sharma rallied more than 30 nurses and other students to participate in *Walk for Water* last year, a six kilometre walk that occurs around the world to raise awareness of the importance of clean water and sanitation. NSO also hosts a mock World Health Organization (WHO) conference every year, which is open to any student in any field. Participants represent a country, and develop and debate a WHO health resolution based on a theme (i.e. clean water rights). "It's an incredible opportunity, and a chance to not just develop advocacy skills, but speaking skills too," says Sharma.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT — Student liaisons are responsible for raising awareness of the benefits of RNAO membership. This

leadership role is offered to one student from each nursing school in Ontario. As well, members of NSO can take on one of eight other leadership roles on the interest group's executive.

Select members can also participate in the RNAO Board of Directors student placement, which gives them direct exposure and learning about the overall functioning of RNAO. This kind of participation shows future employers a level of initiative and an interest in being proactive on nursing and health-care issues, says Shanmuganathan. "When I participated, I was really thrilled to be asked what kinds of things students would like from RNAO. It gave us a chance to influence our group."

NETWORKING — "You meet so many wonderful and influential people at RNAO events," says Shanmuganathan. Knowing very little about the practice before joining, Shanmuganathan says she "...really needed to step outside the school environment and learn what the RN role is all about. When I go to events, I can ask nurses in different sectors all about their work."

BONUS — Several nursing schools are incorporating the cost of RNAO membership into student fees. Among them: Trent University, Humber College, St. Clair College, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Durham College and Georgian College.

tap into exciting new ideas around care, access professional development and research funding, and participate in activities that lead to real policy change.

When Thunder Bay RN Ken Allan decided to become a member of RNAO's Nursing Leadership Network (NLN), he did so in order to interact with 1,858 peers, many outside his focus area of public health. Allan is director of health protection with the Thunder Bay Health District. He has just been elected president of NLN. "Many leadership roles in nursing can feel isolating. Not only did the interest group connect me with other nursing leaders, but it gave me insight into new ways of doing things, such as how to motivate people or deal with conflict." Allan says that discussing and discovering shared nursing leadership strategies heighten his on-the-job leadership confidence. He adds that interest group networking has given him a real sense of connection among all nurses across the health-care system rather than just those in his field—in other words, a sense of community within the profession.

Experiencing a sense of community is a major draw for the 1,753 members of the Community Health Nurses' Initiatives Group (CHNIG). For more than two decades, CHNIG has provided a voice for community health nurses. President Katie Dilworth points out that nurses in the field often work in isolation. "When you think about it, community health nurses travel around, work in client's

homes and rarely with other colleagues."

Dilworth says that one of the big CHNIG membership perks for her, as an RN working at Toronto Public Health, is chatting with nurses in other regions to find out what they are doing in their community. The best time to connect is at CHNIG's National Community Health Nurses Conference. The interest group hosts the conference when it is in Ontario every second year.

"Not only might you learn about new things you can offer clients — for example, RNAO's smoking cessation initiative — you make connections you can tap into year round, province-wide, and sometimes even nationally. I find this incredibly rewarding," adds Dilworth.

Depending on the interest group, there are some great opportunities for novice RNs to make key connections and develop mentorship relationships through interest group involvement. Take the Nursing Research Interest Group (NRIG): President Nancy Purdy says students find it a great advantage to meet with other research leaders at group events to hear real-life stories about what it is like to lead research. The time commitment, the struggle to get funding, grappling with surprising research outcomes — all of these and many more challenges can be overwhelming to nursing researchers, especially when they are new to the field and work in isolation. "Sometimes just having a mentor to listen to their trials and tribulations is helpful," says Purdy, adding that often those

mentors will offer helpful suggestions to various difficulties.

Typically, interest groups offer resource support and sector specific information through websites and newsletters. These channels allow members to stay informed of exclusive professional development opportunities as well. For example, CHNIG hosts a fall webinar every year that helps prepare nurses working on the Canadian Nurses Association's Community Health Nursing Certificate.

"Things are changing really fast in [our field of nursing], so it's hard for us to keep up," says Dilworth. "When you don't have colleagues you can consult with on a daily basis, you need outside resources to keep up your skills." With that in mind, CHNIG launched a new website with RNAO expertise that offers members helpful tools and the opportunity to compete for exclusive CHNIG research bursaries and scholarships (this year \$2,000 was up for grabs).

Several RNAO interest groups offer member-exclusive bursaries and scholarships to help nurses gain much needed professional

policy, Dilworth says the interest group's policy and political action committee was able to protect the privacy of children. Initially, the proposed policy would have had dental hygienists weigh children (since they already visited schools). "First of all, that is not within the scope of their practice," says Dilworth. "Also, consideration had not been given to the confidentiality of overweight children, consent, ethics, or outcomes. The government ended up taking our input and changing the policy appropriately," she adds.

Similarly, after years of active lobbying, and with the proactive leadership of RNAO to secure the role, CHNIG members were thrilled this past February with an announcement by government that it would appoint chief nursing officers to every public health unit across the province.

Sometimes, requests to weigh in on proposed government health-care policy will come from RNAO home office. Dilworth points out how special this kind of involvement is for nurses.

"We are able to comment from a nursing perspective, and end up contributing to making valuable changes that better our profession."

Allan concurs. An NLN colleague is currently weighing in on discussions related to the new chief nursing executive/chief nursing officer governance and leadership initiative underway as part of the passage of the *Excellent Care for All Act*. "Members of NLN can count on having peers in their specialty speaking on their behalf at stakeholder consultations."

The type of commitment and advocacy work required of interest group members varies by group. In addition to CHNIG's policy and political action committee, for example, members can get involved in communications, can become an Ontario Public Health Association liaison, or play a role

on the membership, research and education, and professional nursing practice committees. New members can ask about the committees, or may be approached to join one.

"It is an amazing opportunity to consult on important things that are happening in our province and to make sure the community health nursing perspective is included," Dilworth says. "It's a real honour. Because of my involvement, I have a much better understanding of what occurs in our health system, and how easy it is for politically inappropriate decisions to be made."

You just never know where interest group membership may lead, says Ruth Scofield, assistant professor at McMaster University School of Nursing and the interest group representative on RNAO's board of directors. She points out how many interest groups enjoy strong affiliations at the national level. Her involvement in CHNIG as a former president led to her current role as president of the Community Health Nurses of Canada, for example. "As much as I've always been a life-long learner, and have had a desire for professional development all of my career, the opportunities have just opened up tremendously...by being a part of an RNAO interest group." **RN**

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In her role as president of the Community Health Nurses' Initiatives Group, Katie Dilworth (left) spoke at a media conference last spring about the importance of disclosing calorie counts on menus.

development. The 943 members of NRIIG are free to apply for \$1,000 to \$2,000 in research grants, and up to \$8,000 in scholarships, annually (it varies each year).

Purdy says these offerings are incredibly helpful to nurses new to the field of research because the funding gives them a chance to develop the skills needed to apply for research grants. "Just being able to indicate that you received even a little funding on your CV is helpful when you apply for subsequent funding. You are more likely to get more because they see someone else has invested in you. I speak from experience," adds Purdy. "I was given an NRIIG award and it helped me get additional funding for my doctoral research." Other professional development opportunities offered by NRIIG include online workshops around key interest group specific skills such as "writing for publication" and "preparing grants."

Professional development comes in many forms — financial support, seminars, news updates — and can fundamentally alter the way nursing care is delivered in your field. Unique and exclusive opportunities then arise from the work that's being done within specific interest groups.

Take the advocacy work of CHNIG's six volunteer committees. When the government was developing an obesity screening