



A courageous policy platform for courageous leaders

I RECENTLY HAD THE OPPORTUNITY to visit with nurses in Sudbury, and what a wonderful experience it was. With my guide, Paul-André Gauthier (RNAO's Region 11 Representative), I was able to meet RNs who work in home care, long-term care and acute care, as well as nurses who work with First Nations people, and for Canadian Blood Services. I was moved by their dedication and the common themes they shared with me.

They talked about access to care, and how to optimize the role of the RN, the need to pay nurses an equitable salary across all sectors, the push for a patient-focused approach to care, and how to help people living in poverty to stay healthy. These are issues I have discussed with board and assembly members, and with other RNAO members I have met on my travels as your president.

The nurses in Sudbury wanted to know how they can address these "real" issues. There are many activities that nurses can engage in to make a difference, but it takes courageous leadership.

How does one define this kind of leadership? Put simply, it means confronting the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it may make you or others. It is taking action and not being tied to "an old script" about how things should be. This can be difficult and requires an openness to step out of our comfort

zone. For me, it constitutes one of the moral obligations within nursing: advocating for change at the individual patient level, speaking up for his or her family, and supporting change within the system itself.

With your assistance, RNAO has and will continue to demonstrate courageous leadership. At the end of January, on the heels of the election of Ontario's new Liberal leader and first female

lottery game that compromises the health of the whole family. Malnutrition is an often underdiagnosed condition and one that, if identified early and reversed, can prevent many long-term ill effects on physical health and intellectual development. Nurses see poverty in their everyday practice, which makes them obvious leaders in trying to make a difference.

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premier Kathleen Wynne, RNAO released *Why Your Health Matters*, a platform of policy recommendations that we want all parties to adopt. Many of the key messages in the platform align perfectly with the issues nurses raised with me in Sudbury. For me, the platform represents courageous leadership in action. I want to review two areas that are key and important to nurses.

Poverty reduction

Nurses know that individuals who live below – or at – the poverty line experience more adverse impact on their physical, emotional and mental health. We know that families forced to decide between feeding their children and purchasing asthma medication for their youngest child are playing a "no-win"

Access to care

For my entire nursing career, I have always thought that "everybody needs a nurse." The RN looks at the whole person living through expected and unexpected life events. The goal is to assist the person/family/community to take charge of their health. It becomes difficult to do this if we reduce access to nurses, particularly RNs. The latest report from the College of Nurses of Ontario indicates a drop in the number of RNs in Ontario, consecutively over the past two years. It's a worrisome trend with dire consequences in terms of patient outcomes. Making sure we have enough RNs, and that they are paid fairly, would ensure the kind of access and attention that people urgently need.

The RNAO platform also talks about the link between health and the environment, and about the need to sustain Medicare and strengthen publicly funded, not-for-profit services.

The political platform excites me because the health policy recommendations we propose perfectly complement nursing care and the perspective of the nursing profession. We understand how the social and environmental determinants of health affect individuals and communities. We understand that nurses work with the whole person and the whole system, and if we really want people to be healthy, we need to address such issues as poverty and access to health care.

I encourage you to read RNAO's platform and background material that provides the evidence to support our recommendations. Be courageous leaders and take political action. Speak with your MPP, your city or town councillor, other leaders in your community and in your workplace. As nurses, we offer a unique perspective and must speak out on these issues.

I know I will be speaking up. Will you? **RN**

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For a copy of *Why Your Health Matters* and its various background materials, visit www.RNAO.ca/policy