



Speaking truth to power: A moral duty for every nurse

RNAO'S IMMEDIATE PAST-PRESIDENT Vanessa Burkoski was fired in June from her role as chief nursing executive and VP, professional scholarly practice, at London Health Sciences Centre (LHSC). Her unconscionable termination happened shortly after she represented RNAO at the launch of its groundbreaking report: [Mind the Safety Gap in Health System Transformation: Reclaiming the Role of the RN.](#)

Never in the 91 years of RNAO's history has a member of the association's executive been fired for speaking out on behalf of the nursing profession. We must make sure this is the last time.

Since news of the dismissal became public on June 24, almost 3,300 RNs, NPs, RPNs, and members of the public have signed [the association's call](#) for Health Minister Eric Hoskins to launch an independent investigation.

As I reflect on what happened to Vanessa – our colleague, friend, and a stellar leader – my mind turns to the three things that guide my own life actions: values, evidence and courage. At RNAO, it fills me with pride to witness time and again the values-based work carried out by members and staff. And, evidence is foundational to everything we do at RNAO. They are ingrained in our association's culture and mission. But courage is different and far more difficult. It necessitates speaking truth to power.

Some of us are born with

courage. Some of us are thrown into situations where we need to develop courage. And some of us choose to remain silent in the face of adversity. It is this latter group that I am calling upon to learn from Vanessa's actions and from RNAO.

First, please know that RNAO stands behind its members –

“WHEN OUR ACTIONS ARE DRIVEN BY VALUES, AND BACKED WITH EVIDENCE, WE HAVE A DUTY TO BE COURAGEOUS AND SPEAK OUT.”

whether elected executives or frontline RNs, NPs, or nursing students. This was – and still is – the case with Vanessa. As an elected representative, she received support from LHSC to take on the high profile position of president-elect and then president. To then lose her livelihood as a result of this role is not only shocking, but simply unacceptable. Let me be clear: No employer will succeed in silencing our executives for speaking out on RNAO policies and positions.

Moreover, no employer should succeed in silencing any nurse who is speaking about safety issues in their own organization. Frontline nurses are the guardians of our health system, 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week. Nurse executives like Vanessa are the safety valves in our system,

building bridges from the frontlines of patient care to the boardrooms of power. RNAO will not stand for any attempts to muzzle their voices.

Our association has been developing strong and courageous leaders for many years. That's because we don't have just one spokesperson vocalizing the

views of nurses across this province. We have thousands, and that number is only increasing as our membership numbers increase. RNAO hosts training sessions for the board of directors and assembly members, as well as general members who want to develop expertise in speaking out for nursing and speaking out for health. Thousands of voices, anchored in values, driven by evidence, and empowered by courage: that is authentic leadership.

Every year at RNAO's annual general meeting, we report back to you on how many people have spoken out to politicians and to the media about issues that matter to nurses and the public we serve. General members make up the majority of individuals on this list. They are courageous in their knowledge and passion on so many issues

and challenges facing Ontarians and the profession. More than once, these members have had to stick their necks out and stand strong – whether advocating on broad health and health-care issues, or on behalf of patients or colleagues.

As a collective, RNAO has stuck its neck out on numerous issues. Most recently, our *Mind the Safety Gap* report, and [supervised injection sites](#) come to mind. Not long ago, we stood up for refugee health, and were the only nursing group across this nation to secure intervenor status before the Federal Court of Appeal. Our courage was also evident when we were the first to step up to the plate to speak about health system transformation and share our *Enhancing Community Care for Ontarians* (ECCO) model, or when we expressed concerns about Ebola and SARS. There is no doubt that we will continue to stick our neck out when other tough issues arise.

I call on all nurses to overcome reluctance or fear to speak out for nursing and speak out for health. When our actions are driven by values, and backed with evidence, we have a duty to be courageous and speak truth to power. Ontarians count on us in health and in sickness. **RN**

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