

Listening to members, acting on their voices and building a stronger collective



November 1st marks the beginning of another membership year at RNAO. As I look back at everything we've accomplished in the last 12 months, I'm struck by

the incredible power of your voices. It's your commitment to speaking out that keeps our association strong, and adds to the conversations that matter most to our profession, our communities and our patients.

One of those discussions was sparked by my last column. My July/August Executive Director's Dispatch triggered four letters from members. Two writers expressed their praise, while others wrote of their disappointment (see page 7), and I value them all. Your opinions and eloquence in voicing them allow our association to move from strength to greater strength. While we may not always agree on each point we debate, it's the openness and intelligence of our discussions that will ensure nursing, health, and health care continue to grow stronger and meet the needs of those we serve.

In the coming year, your voices will be more important than ever as we face the many challenges and opportunities that lay ahead. We must tackle threats to our profession, but that is only one of the battles we must fight to win. Others include: educating the public about the importance of social and environmental determinants of health; persuading politicians to master the political will to act swiftly to eliminate poverty and to clean up our environment; and remaining vigilant in our cause to protect and strengthen our universally accessible health-care system. This last point is extremely important in light of the recent events both in Canada and the United States.

At the annual general meeting of the Canadian Medical Association this summer, physicians passed a resolution calling on governments and health authorities to examine the place internal market mecha-

nisms – including a possible role for the private sector in delivering publicly funded care – could have in our health-care system. The outgoing President of the CMA, Dr. Robert Ouellet, a staunch advocate for more private health-care delivery, said people should not be afraid of the word “competition.” In light of this disheartening news, RNAO issued a press release encouraging the new President, Anne Doig, to strengthen Medicare by pursuing not-for-profit solutions – a preference expressed by more than 86 per cent of Canadians in a poll Nanos Research conducted for the Canadian Health Coalition in August.

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Myths about Canada's health system have also been pushed up from the United States, where the wealthiest country in the world still fails to provide health care for all. Opponents of President Barack Obama's plan to provide health insurance for the 45.7 million Americans who currently lack it – including 8 million children – spent the summer dragging out falsehoods about Canada's health-care system. We need to ensure these fictions are not allowed to infect our own discussion on health care. The fact is, our system works.

Americans spend 16 per cent of their GDP on health care, compared to Canada's 10 per cent. Despite the higher cost in the U.S., we in Canada deliver better results. Not only do we provide health coverage to

100 per cent of our residents, we also live longer than our American counterparts (78.4 years vs. 75.4 years for men; and 83 years vs. 80.7 for women). Our infant mortality is also lower at five per thousand compared to 6.7 per thousand in the U.S.

In August, I had the opportunity to speak about the realities and advantages of our health-care system when I addressed the American National Black Nurses Association's annual meeting, which was held in Toronto. It was a chance to share the work we do to protect and extend not-for-profit health care in Canada, and encourage our colleagues to fight for improvements in their own country. The energy in the room was palpable, filled with hope and a desire to make a difference. As the debate continues south of the border, we will continue to offer our support. Our nations' destinies have much in common, and all of our citizens deserve the best.

As nurses, we play a crucial role in bringing about positive social change. After all, it was nurses who mobilized themselves and the public in Canada to help make our Medicare system a reality. Nurses – with the Canadian Nurses Association at the forefront – from coast to coast to coast wrote letters and met with politicians to push for the *Canada Health Act*. Twenty-five years on, nurses, and especially members of RNAO, continue that advocacy role to ensure our health-care system provides care to all who need it, regardless of their income levels.

As we embark on our next membership year, our voices on these issues and many others will continue to be a source of inspiration for us all. Let's work to multiply the number of those voices by encouraging every RN to become an RNAO member and join in speaking out for health, speaking out for nursing. It's the strength of our convictions and force of our voices that will serve us to build a better tomorrow. **RN**

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