

Building knowledge, strength behind and beyond prison walls



Nursing Week 2004 presented many memorable opportunities to tour health-care facilities and to meet nurses across Ontario. One invitation came from the nurses at

the Kingston Penitentiary, inviting me for a first-hand look at one of Canada's oldest prisons. Since I was already fully booked for Nursing Week, the visit took place later, on June 24.

This visit marks my introduction to health care in a prison setting. It was a real eye-opener, emotional and particularly overwhelming.

As I entered the prison, the feeling I experienced as the doors closed behind me is one I'll never forget. It felt very final as the doors swung shut behind me. The first thing that came to my mind was 'how do we support nurses walking through these doors every day?' We know the need for care is there, but the need for support to colleagues providing the care is also vital.

This visit brought into sharp focus the work nurses do behind prison walls – an environment that few of us truly understand.

But corrections nurses are not all that different from you and me. In fact, like many of our colleagues, these nurses practice in specialty areas such as palliative care, dialysis and mental health. Some have been in the prison setting for 17 years or more. It takes a special group of nurses to do that job, and it takes a visit to the prison setting to truly understand what it means to work with this population.

They are a sector that is funded primarily by the federal government and one that feels it needs more support – financial and otherwise. Corrections nurses with whom I have spoken feel they are marginalized and

have been forgotten. With the federal election behind us, Prime Minister Paul Martin and the Liberal government must be held accountable for promises made to address health care as a priority over the coming years – and part of that is addressing the quality of worklife for RNs both behind and beyond prison walls.

RNAO will push to make sure corrections nurses get the support they need. We will also play a vital role in offering other

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forms of support to these nurses. My visit to Kingston in June reminded me just how much nursing has changed, and how important it is to equip nurses with the tools to deliver care regardless of the environment. RNAO's Best Practice Guidelines (BPG) do that very well.

When I visited Kingston I brought along the BPG on maintaining professional boundaries, vital if nurses are to function effectively yet professionally in any practice environment. Other BPGs that serve our colleagues in this setting focus on client centred care and therapeutic relationships. Indeed, these and other BPGs serve the

prison environment as well as they serve all other environments.

During Nursing Week 2004, I joined several MPPs for visits to nurses' workplaces across the province. My role was to act as a conduit for politicians to better understand what nurses do day-in and day-out. I recognize just how important it is not only to educate politicians about the role of nurses but to also educate our peers and ourselves about the work we do. Nursing Week provided the perfect opportunity for me as your new president to get to the frontlines and to learn as much about the various nursing roles as the politicians I was accompanying.

One of the most important lessons I took away from my visit to Kingston Penitentiary was that there are some prisoners who really want to get well. And there are nurses trying to make that happen. The nurses with whom I visited also helped me realize not everyone in the prison setting is a prisoner – many are fellow nurses who care for some very ill people in our society. Those nurses, like all nurses, need to be recognized for the hard work they do.

Nursing Week is just one week out of the year to step back and recognize the profession as a whole. But it is certainly not the only opportunity we have to take the time to understand what our colleagues and fellow nurses do.

I hope to have the opportunity year round to continue my exploration of the diverse and multifaceted workplaces that define nursing today, and to become a stronger and more understanding nurse for it. This experience surely will enhance my ability to represent registered nurses more effectively as your president.

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