

# Creating a healthier society: RNAO's challenge to Ontario's political parties



**From the time I** was a nursing student it was clear to me that there was a significant link between poverty and health. While doing clinical placements, I visited people in their homes and it became obvious that those who were economically disadvantaged, or had few supports, were severely compromised. Through my 40 years in the profession, I have gained a fuller understanding of the systemic causes of poverty and its impact on health.

As a Victorian Order nurse in rural Ontario in the 1970s, I saw the day-to-day struggle of people who lived in poverty. Many clients were deprived of the basics of a dignified life: nutrition, access to dental and health care, clothing, decent housing, and community inclusion. Indeed, many of my clients focused their energies on finding their next meal or paying the rent.

I'll never forget visiting a family devastated by poverty and living in the countryside of Ontario. Their home was sparsely furnished. The children living there ranged in age from infant to 10 years. The younger children, who had not been toilet trained, were not clothed from the waist down; a clear indication there wasn't enough money for clothing. The 10-year-old daughter, whom I was bringing to an appointment in a developmental and mental health clinic, was emaciated and terrified of adults. Memories such as this never leave one's mind. You think about the inequities inherent in these situations, and realize how privileged some of us are compared to those overwhelmed with social needs.

And then there are the environmental challenges.

My studies towards a master's of public health during the mid-1980s underscored the incredible impact of the environment on health. Living conditions in environments where people are struggling to breathe, or where the water is hardly drink-

able, very clearly lead to health problems in the community.

These social and environmental issues deserve urgent attention because the situations I've seen are situations to which every nurse can relate. More and more nurses are also aware of the numerous studies documenting the evidence linking ill health with poverty and the state of our environment.

As Ontarians, we enjoy the privilege of living in one of the most prosperous provinces in this country. Shamefully, how-

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ever, we witness an increasing number of women and men who are left behind. It's troubling how many children live in poverty, many in the midst of growing wealth and inequality. I am so very proud that RNAO has joined with social justice groups to seek change. As nurses, we want a province where progress is made and enjoyed by all.

On May 10, RNAO organized a press conference at Queen's Park and issued a challenge to Ontario's political parties. That challenge is contained in a substantive report called *Creating a Healthier Society* (see pg.25). It sets out recommendations in areas such as the social determinants of health. It includes: measures to raise the standard of living of the working

poor and those families that receive social assistance; better protection for vulnerable workers; and a community-based housing strategy.

Our platform also makes key recommendations on the environment, calling for more emphasis on energy conservation and an end to the reliance on coal fired electricity plants and nuclear power. We're also asking the political parties to take concrete steps to ensure Ontarians can raise their families in a healthier environment. That means reducing people's exposure to pollution, toxins, carcinogens and harmful chemicals.

Critically important are also the recommendations aimed at: strengthening our not-for-profit Medicare system; rejecting for-profit delivery and P3s; committing to a nursing workforce that enables more RNs to work full-time; retaining senior nurses for as long as we can; and expanding roles and initiatives to educate and recruit the next generation of nurses to care for Ontarians in the decades to come.

We will continue to speak out until more is done to alleviate these fundamental problems that create illness and advance chronic disease in our society. That includes continued advocacy for a publicly funded, not-for-profit health-care system that is there for everyone when they need it.

Given the level of trust we enjoy among the public, we believe no other group of health-care professionals is better positioned to take action on these issues than registered nurses. We must do all we can as we look ahead to the election in October to persuade our political leaders to heed nurses' advice, and adopt the recommendations contained in RNAO's document.

I urge you to read it, discuss it with your colleagues, your patients, your families, friends and communities. And please engage your local politicians by visiting your MPP to discuss our platform.

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