Bringing advocacy to the forefront on the national scene

One of my greatest privileges, as your president, is to sit on the board of the Canadian Nurses Association. Participation at this level brings the strong, committed and passionate voices of Ontario nurses to the national picture. It allows RNAO to assess what is happening across Canada, to consider the potential effects of those actions for Ontario, and to protect our health-care system from possible threats. Having attended the CNA annual general meeting in June, I wanted to give you a snapshot of trends and changes that may require both CNA and RNAO to act to defend that which we value.

Among the most disturbing emerging national trends are those intended to silence nursing's voice. In British Columbia, Manitoba and Nova Scotia, three former professional associations have been re-packaged as Colleges, stripped of their voices on every non-regulatory issue. Who fills this void? Who speaks for the nursing profession in these provinces? For RNAO, this is an important reminder to cherish our voice, and use it at every opportunity to support, celebrate and grow our advocacy.

In Alberta, we see a concerted threat to staffing levels and, by extension, the health of Alberta's nurses and the public. The new chief executive officer of the Alberta Health Services organization, which has consolidated the province's health-care system, has been clear that balanced budgets are the priority. Alberta's focus has shifted from active recruitment of nurses nationally and internationally to hiring limits for any position, even those newly vacant. The lesson for us in Ontario? Budgets cannot be allowed to trump the gains we have made in conquering the nursing shortage and improving quality care. In the interests of protecting patient care and workplace health, RNs' voices must be heard in health organizations and in every political office, regardless of which party holds power there.

Against this backdrop of emerging national issues, active discussion on the floor of CNA's AGM focused on two issues – the crucial solution nurses offer in a stressed and stretched system, and the increasing presence of unregulated workers in the health-care system.

At the forefront of this thoughtful and deeply concerned conversation was the recognition that unregulated workers have played – and will continue to play – a vital role in our complex health-care delivery system. Their support in many areas, including community-based mental health, long-term care and home care, are critical to ensuring individuals remain in their own homes and communities. Respect for these workers, and for the value they bring to those we all serve, must be a fundamental element of any discussion. Nonetheless, there are major issues ahead of us. Education for these groups is not standardized. Nurses are not always given clear support and direction regarding the specific, appropriate actions for these workers. Role confusion abounds, among both professionals and patients. And we are now facing the proliferation of these roles within the acute care system as well. RNAO is well-positioned to face these challenges with our Healthy Work Environment Best Practice Guidelines and our wealth of organizational knowledge. Work is already in progress to fight back against this dangerous trend. In the next several months, under the leadership of our Executive Director, Doris Grinspun, RNAO will tackle any approach to staffing and care delivery that does not reflect best practice for Ontarians, and indeed, Canadians

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Of course, the CNA meeting also brought the chance to celebrate resources that will help strengthen our profession. This year's meeting coincided with the country's first annual Day of Reconciliation, which commemorates the federal government's apology to survivors of the residential-schools system that devastated so many Aboriginal people. At this year's AGM, CNA and its partners, the Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada and the Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing, released a document that offers a blueprint nursing schools can turn to for cultural safety competencies that are relevant to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. It's a step that will further deepen the diversity our profession brings to communities where we live and work.

As nursing in Canada moves forward, we are ready to continue to ensure our voice is heard in every health-care debate. Nursing can, and must, exercise leadership in the political arena. It remains to be seen whether or not we will go to the polls as a country later this year. But when a federal election does come around again, both RNAO and CNA will be at the forefront of the conversation with evidence-based approaches to the challenges we face. We will demand that politicians at every level are accountable to the people they represent, the very same people we serve in communities across our country. **RN**

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