

IN CONVERSATION WITH...

Vanessa Burkoski

Vanessa Burkoski is set to become RNAO's 53rd president this spring. In an interview with *Registered Nurse Journal*, she talks about her goals and how she wants to help front-line nurses. BY MELISSA DI COSTANZO

Why did you become a nurse? I was about 14 when my grandmother became ill. I used to go with my mom constantly to visit her in the hospital, and I watched very closely how she was treated by nurses, in particular. I remember how the nurses would interact with the family as well as the patient and I thought 'this is the kind of profession where you're able to use a combination of knowledge and interactions with people to really make a difference.' That was my first notion that nursing might be for me.

What did you learn as provincial chief nursing officer that will help you in your role as RNAO president? I had the great opportunity – and one of the few opportunities that a nurse will ever have – to work in the domain of nursing policy. Given that, I was able to not only get to know how policy is formulated in the system, but I also gained an understanding of how to navigate government. RNAO's president requires skill in understanding the government system, the health-care environment, and where you can leverage opportunities to change or enhance policy or bring in new regulation or legislation. Being immersed in policy and having the

opportunity to immerse myself in government relations, and meeting and working with nursing and other health-care stakeholders in the community...has provided me with some of the foundational skills and knowledge that I need.

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Why did you want to become president of RNAO? I have a passion for policy. I also have an extreme interest in supporting enhanced growth and improvement in health care for our patients, and advocating for the role nurses play. Ensuring they have all

the tools and supports that enable them to deliver the best quality and safest care is really important to me. For me, it's a perfect fit.

What's the first thing you hope to do as president of the association? We talk about building a seamless system of care for our patients, a system where...patients and family members know who to go to when they need help. We need to make sure that all of the right services are aligned appropriately for any patient's journey. To do that, we also have to align ourselves appropriately as nurses. I still hear, and it saddens me, more about the differences in nurses than about our common goal and our common mission. There is a need for us to get to understand each other better. That is going to bode well for patients and the system because there is no doubt that the separation between what we do in acute care, long-term care, community care...that's all going to change as time moves forward. We need to be ready to streamline and to be able to ensure that our work is building on the work of nurses in other sectors.



To watch selected scenes from our interview with RNAO's president-elect, visit www.RNAO.ca/Q&AwithVanessaBurkoski

What attributes do you bring to the position, and how will they help you in your role? I tell an honest story. I come from a place of having not only practised on the frontline for 15 years, but really having a more incredible nursing career than I could have wished for because I've had the opportunity to learn and grow across various leadership roles. I have a genuine desire and commitment to improving health care...for patients and for nurses. I'm visionary and strategic in my approach, and I have a lot of patience and respect for the perspectives of others.

What do you hope to achieve as president of RNAO? I would like to play a critical role in the implementation of ECCO (*Enhancing Community Care for Ontarians*, RNAO's 2012 report)...it is so important. It means we can finally bring together...nurses who can connect patients at the right time and in the right place, and in an effective and efficient way, to the services they need. The system really is fragmented now and primary care is...the central holding ground of all of the comprehensive information that is needed to ensure there are no gaps or redundancies or inefficiencies in the care of a patient. If we can

enable our nurses to provide that care coordination role through our primary care system, I think more people will be linked up in a much more efficient way to the services they require. That's going to keep people healthier. That's going to ensure we are using

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our resources, our very scarce and important health-care resources, appropriately.

What would you like to learn from frontline nurses that will help RNAO in its work?
 I would like to learn more about how we

can support front-line nurses in their everyday work. I'd like to know from them which tools and resources...they need. I would like to know how we can improve on our advocacy for them.

Do you have a nurse role model you will try to emulate? I have had the most incredible nursing colleagues. I pick and choose some of the most impressive qualities I have seen in some of those colleagues, and I try to cobble them together and use them to the best of my ability. I give all of my colleagues who have been engaged in my life and in my professional journey kudos for having shared just a little bit of themselves with me.

What excites you about taking on this kind of leadership role? RNAO has a long history of being able to move really important pieces of policy regulation and legislation, and to be a part of that, for me, is...what drives me to continue to be a nurse. It's what keeps me really inspired about the profession, and that's what I'm really looking forward to. **RN**

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