

Nurses Should Play Greater Role in Health Policy Planning & Management

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A 2009 Gallup telephone survey commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) found that strong majorities of opinion leaders believe nurses should play a greater role in health policy planning and management than they currently do. This article reviews some of the findings of the survey, and discusses some of the barriers to nurses assuming greater leadership roles.

The Gallup survey conducted between August 18 and October 30, 2009 asked opinion leaders from government, insurance, corporate, health services and industry sectors to complete a survey entitled: *"Nursing Leadership from Bedside to Boardroom: Opinion Leaders' Perceptions."* Strong majorities of those surveyed said nurses should be more influential in such areas as reducing medical errors, improving patient safety and quality of care, promoting wellness and increasing preventative care, improving health care system efficiency, care coordination and reducing costs. In previous Gallup polls nursing has ranked at or near the top as the most ethical and honest profession. However, opinion leaders perceived nurses as having less effect on health care reform than other industry sectors including government, pharmaceutical and insurance companies even though they regarded nurses as one of the most trustworthy sources of health information. In response to this finding, Dr. Patricia Gerrity RN, PhD, FAAN, associate dean for community programs at the College of Nursing and Health Professions at Drexel University, Philadelphia opined that nurses work in a dysfunctional system which focuses on revenue and business models over which insurance and pharmaceutical companies dominate instead of outcomes of care. The survey found that leaders thought nurses' primary influence was in the areas of improving quality of care (50%), coordinating patient care (40%) and reducing medical errors (50%).

However, they ranked nurses sixth behind other stakeholders in influencing health care reform over the next 5 to 10 years: government officials (75%), insurance executives (56%), pharmaceutical executives (46%), healthcare executives (46%), physicians (37%), patients (20%), and nurses (14%).

Leaders recognized the unique experiences and perspectives nurses bring to patient care and acknowledged nurses as important contributors to shaping health care policy and delivery. 83% surveyed want nurses to help with improving healthcare efficiency and reducing cost, improving healthcare coordination (84%), improving healthcare adaptation to aging populations (83%), and improving healthcare access (74%).

Dr. Mary Naylor PhD, RN, FAAN, professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing and program director of the RWJF Interdisciplinary Nursing Quality Research Initiative (INQRI) reacted to the survey findings by saying interdisciplinary teams of scholars from nursing along with other disciplines are already engaging in evidence based practices which contain costs, improve quality of care, and increase access to care. She added that as a profession highly trusted by the public, nursing is uniquely positioned to achieve a high level of influence in healthcare priorities nationally.

The Gallup survey noted that 68% of opinion leaders perceived that nurses were not important decision makers when compared with physicians; 68% said nurses were not perceived as revenue generators compared to physicians, while 62% felt nurses focused more on primary care than preventative care. A significant majority, 62% said nurses did not have a single voice in speaking on issues of national importance.

Drs. Naylor and Gerrity have been recognized by RWJF's *Raise the Voice Campaign* as nurse leaders who successfully developed and deployed models of care in collaboration with other nurses, physicians and healthcare professionals. Thus far, these models have utilized evidence based research that improves outcomes and prevents repeat hospitalizations. Additionally, RWJF is also funding national program initiatives to institute nurse-led models of care and to identify and develop nurse leaders in higher education, health systems and to establish nurse leaders on influential boards of directors. The ultimate goal is the removal of these barriers so that health care systems can fully utilize the knowledge, ideas and expertise nurses offer.

In summary, the result of this survey should serve as a call to action for nurses to become engaged in shaping healthcare policy. Nurses are vital to the successful development and promotion of health prevention and wellness models which lower health care costs and improve patient outcomes. Health care systems cannot be successful without nurses who participate in the creation of strong foundational building blocks from which to drive its delivery. There are many other industry sectors (for example, insurance and pharmaceutical companies) who are key players in shaping opinions on healthcare policy and delivery. Many continue to be extremely influential even though they do not have the rich bedside experiences and the one-on-one patient perspectives that nurses see every day. By numbers alone nurses can be a tremendous force to shape the healthcare debate. However, we can only be a tremendous influence if we collectively engage and ACT. We must raise our voices and share our stories and experiences as nurses with lawmakers and industry leaders alike. We cannot turn aside and wait for other nurse leaders to go it alone. They need our help and we have the capacity within ourselves to get involved. It is time for nurses to utilize the full capacity of our numbers to help re-shape and deliver a reformed healthcare system that improves healthcare outcomes and promotes wellness for all Americans.