A recent nurse educator’s conference, a keynote speaker discussed motivation. According to the speaker, the key to starting the day with an unstoppable attitude is feeling good about whatever you are doing (Rizzo, 2019). One of these keys for nursing is empowerment.

Empowerment refers to the ability to act as the primary stakeholder in your professional career, have a sense of autonomy in your practice, and work to the full extent of your educational preparation and licensure. Thus, it is troubling that the literature is replete with articles about a pervasive sense of disempowerment among nurses (Regan & Rodriguez, 2011; Singh, Pilkington, & Patrick, 2014; Smith, Capitulo, Griffin, & Fitzpatrick, 2012; Wang, Kunaviktikul, & Wichaikhum, 2013). Findings from these studies are sobering: powerless nurses are less satisfied with their jobs and have a higher rate of burnout than empowered nurses. Further, a lack of empowerment contributes to less positive patient outcomes and quality of care.

Organizations can promote or hinder nurses’ sense of empowerment. Providing information about and including nurses in decisions regarding the many facets of the organization can promote empowerment. Full participation in shared governance councils and policy committees, promotion of the professional development and certification of nurses, full input on staffing models, and staff membership in leadership and administrative councils also are examples of organizational promotion of empowerment of nurses (Hess, 2018; Thew, 2019). This is seen at the executive nurse level, but what about the nurse at the point of care?

Empowerment of the clinical nurse should be considered the framework on which professional growth and development are built. Similar to professional growth and development, it is important for nurses to take control of this aspect of their careers by being assertive in stating concerns and standing up for themselves.

It Takes a Village

Empowerment does not occur in isolation; it is dependent upon the connections and networks we develop. Discussing and aligning values of all members of the nursing team can promote engagement, productivity, and empowerment. Involving nurses in process changes in the practice setting has been shown to improve support and decrease resistance (Bowers, 2011). Taking a leading role in process changes in the practice setting (e.g., shift length, care delivery models, coverage for breaks) can give nurses more control over the work environment.

TeamSTEPPS® is another example of a way to increase nurse empowerment. Developed by the U.S. Department of Defense and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, this program focuses on improving the quality, safety, and efficiency of healthcare delivery through teamwork and interprofessional collaboration (King et al., 2008). Important aspects of TeamSTEPPS include leadership, performance monitoring, mutual support, and communication; all these factors can improve a sense of empowerment.

It Takes Courage

Stepping up isn’t always easy. Trying to stand up in the swiftly moving current of health care can be risky because you may falter. However, taking that leap of faith with an eye toward the greater good of what can be done as empowered nurses, not only for ourselves as individuals but also for our patients and colleagues, far outweighs the risk. In April, one nurse stood up against a health system and filed a class action lawsuit over lack of compensation for lunch and work breaks which are subject to frequent interruptions. Last year, medical-surgical nurses in Massachusetts stood up in opposition to a proposition for nurse staffing based on patient ratios. Two years ago, a nurse in the emergency department was arrested for protecting a patient’s right of consent when she refused to draw blood for laboratory tests requested by a police officer. These are just a few examples of nurses standing up for their beliefs and, more importantly, their rights and the rights of their patients. Is it risky? Perhaps, but the benefits sometimes outweigh the risks. This is a decision we must all make from time to time.

Taking on a new role or additional responsibilities can be unsettling. Returning to school after years in practice can cause an increase in anxiety. Standing up in a meeting to voice concern over a new policy can be intimidating. Volunteering as a member of an interprofessional committee or board can feel overwhelming.
Yet, each of these examples demonstrates personal growth. Each reflects an instance of nurses taking charge of their careers and reaffirming their sense of empowerment, boosting their self-image, and taking ownership of their profession.

**AMSN’s Role in Nurse Empowerment**

As a professional organization, AMSN takes its responsibility in promoting nurse empowerment seriously. Three of the organization’s four strategic goals address empowerment of the nurse through different lenses. The first of these concentrates on the healthy practice environment. AMSN recognizes units that demonstrate a healthy practice environment along with effective leadership; recruitment and retention of competent staff; implementation of evidence-based practice; demonstration of positive patient outcomes; and commitment to lifelong learning for staff members. Cumulatively, these aspects promote nurse empowerment.

Professional development is the second strategic goal that promotes nurse empowerment by providing opportunities for certification as well as online and conference learning. AMSN offers grants and scholarships for education as well as research and evidence-based practice projects. AMSN provides up-to-date information in MEDSURG Nursing and MedSurg Matters!. The Clinical Leadership Development Program empowers the clinical nurse by providing the dimensions and competencies of leadership as well as the tools to achieve them.

Finally, AMSN is working to empower nurses through its attention to legislative issues that impact nursing and patient care. As care providers on the frontlines, nurses have the most direct knowledge of patient needs and of practices that promote teamwork and safe nursing care. It thus seems natural that nurses have a major say in legislation impacting our practice and the care and safety of our patients. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Our legislative team is working diligently to provide information directly to our legislators regarding medical-surgical nurses’ abilities and roles in developing the healthcare system of tomorrow. They also are encouraging legislators to protect nurses’ rights and abilities to practice to the full extent of our licensures. AMSN also empowers nurses by providing information to members regarding legislative bills that impact nursing as well our patients, offering you the opportunity to reach out directly to your legislators and let them know your thoughts.

The current healthcare landscape requires the empowerment of nurses not only for the sake of the nurse, but also to improve patient outcomes. While healthcare organizations certainly should promote empowerment of clinical nurses, it may be even more important for nurses to take ownership of their own empowerment. This requires being a part of an effective team, taking risks, and depending on resources such as those provided through membership in a professional organization. The journey to empowerment may not be easy and the road may take you where you never expected to be, but it’s worth it. Consider this final thought: if nurses aren’t empowered to speak up for themselves, how can they speak up for their patients?

**REFERENCES**


