



Marcel La Haye

What's happening with career planning?

It's a well-known fact that the different levels of training and the wide variety of fields of practice in our profession make for a great number of career options. I like to tell young people that their careers will be the ones they make for themselves, pure and simple! These days, it is possible to choose an exclusively clinical career path. Back in my day a "career" in nursing necessarily meant going into management or teaching, but those times are behind us now.

As soon as they have completed their DCS and obtained their permits, new nurses enter a profession with a great range of employment possibilities. Once they have enough experience, some will even choose to do humanitarian work abroad. Those who prefer to pursue their nursing studies at the undergraduate or graduate level are guaranteed that their degrees will open doors to positions commensurate with their training, with corresponding pay. In fact, the Department of Health and Social Services estimates that from 900 to 1,500 new nurses with bachelor's degrees will be needed to satisfy the needs of the job market in Quebec. This will not be an easy target to reach: in fact the Order is expecting a shortage of undergraduate and graduate nurses.

This is why the OIIQ has put on tremendous pressure to obtain proper funding for the integrated DCS-BAC program. We have also supported efforts by universities that have been calling for graduate and postgraduate scholarships to overcome the looming faculty shortage. It seems that their pleas have been heard, since the Department of Education, Recreation and Sports is reportedly about to announce a major scholarship program. That's what I call good news!

Bachelor's students worried

Panic struck university campuses after the adoption of the government decree governing working conditions in the public sector. Rumour had it that there would be no point in completing a bachelor's degree, since "Premier Charest had decided to no longer recognize bachelor's degrees where salaries were concerned," particularly for future graduates. As a result, dozens of young students gave up, jeopardizing their career plans.

So what is the story, really? In recent negotiations, the parties agreed to abolish the job title *graduate nurse (infirmière bachelière)*, but couldn't agree on career paths and recognition for holders of bachelor's degrees. In keeping with its professional model, the Fédération des infirmières et infirmiers du Québec (FIIQ) called a DCS for practising nurses, and recommended extra pay for additional years of training. The government negotiators preferred to maintain recognition of graduate nurses in specific clinical roles, with a higher salary scale. In other words, graduate nurses would not be paid as such unless their degree was required for the position they held. In that case, a degree could not be replaced by years of experience. The government position won out.

To complicate things, in the hope of attracting and retaining nursing staff in the current context of nursing shortages, many institutions had started paying graduate nurses according to the higher wage scale, regardless of what position they held. However, the government feels that it is not fair for two people doing the same work not to receive the same pay.

According to our information, at least two job titles in the collective agreement will require a bachelor's degree in nursing, and under an agreement between the FIIQ and the government, **all** individuals who are already being paid according to the wage scale for graduate nurses will be offered positions requiring that degree. If individual gains were not protected in this way, the Order would certainly not hesitate to condemn the government position.

Students are wondering whether institutions will have enough positions requiring a university nursing degree to be filled, and are worried that they will be stuck with the DCS wage scale for too long. Their concerns are understandable. As far as I know, there will not be any workforce plan or departmental orders in this regard. It is true that budget constraints may lead some institutions to take a more conservative approach. But at a time of increasing shortages, we can assume that young nurses with a university degree will have plenty of choices, and will prefer institutions that are trying to organize their work so as to recognize these nurses' worth. The Order intends to condemn any decision by the Department that could aggravate the nursing shortage. I also invite Councils of Nurses (CNs) to be vigilant and to become involved in drawing up a workforce plan for their own institutions.

Contradictions inherent in the profession

There is no consensus within the profession in Quebec regarding the value of university studies for nurses. The Order would have preferred to see the position implemented by the Ontario government in January 2005, i.e. protecting all nurses with a grandfather clause and declaring a bachelor's degree a prerequisite for a nursing permit. In so doing, Ontario recognized that, to protect the public, developments in the profession (meaning the complexity of nursing practice) justified an increase in basic training. Since nursing salaries are fairly high in Ontario, it became more "efficient" in economic terms to require a bachelor's degree for all new recruits, in that nurses were already being paid at the graduate nurse level. Subsequently, Ontario also decided to boost training requirements for nursing assistants and their contribution to nursing care.

In Quebec, the debate as to whether a bachelor's degree should be required has always been extremely painful and acrimonious. In 1997, when the Order attempted to bring Quebec into line with Canadian trends, a major crisis erupted in our ranks. Opposition from unions and CEGEP teachers led the Order to hold an Estates General on the profession. It was an historic moment! The outcome of these discussions was that the Order no longer insisted that a bachelor's degree should be a prerequisite for a nursing permit, but rather called for the introduction of an integrated DCS-BAC degree and a review of the field of practice. Quebec nurses had made their decision, and chose to go with different practices for different levels of training, rather than requiring everyone to have a bachelor's degree. This agreement by all parties in the profession led to the creation of the integrated DCS-BAC in 2000, along with significant advances in the field of practice and a greater range of types of practice.

Nonetheless, some of us regret that the "Ontario solution" (in fact, the solution applied everywhere else in Canada) was not applied in Quebec. We can't rewrite history, but we must understand how it has affected the present. When it comes to career planning, the profession chose diversification over standardization. Quebec's health system is headed toward unprecedented recognition of nurses' contribution in all their different roles: as nurses, nurse practitioners, care consultants, clinical nurses and soon, most likely, specialized nurse practitioners.

Young women and men who choose nursing as a profession will quickly understand the rules of the game and learn how to use them to their advantage. Degrees will be valued insofar as they are part of increasingly diversified career plans. In conclusion, I would like to quote Julie Allard, Chair of the Montérégie Youth Committee, speaking about the panic on the Université de Sherbrooke campus: "Many nurses are questioning their decision to pursue their studies. I can't claim to be able to predict the future, but whatever happens, a bachelor's degree in nursing is sure to be an asset, regardless of where you're headed. You don't have to become a researcher or manager to benefit from higher education." ●



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