

What Is in a Name: The Case of Nursing

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The purpose of this paper is to create a debate on whether the name “nursing” has any influence on how the nursing profession is perceived today by other healthcare professionals and the general public the nursing profession serves. A quantum leap is being suggested by the authors, as only a paradigm shift could change the world’s mindset on nursing and its recognition as a profession. A change in name is what the authors see as a way of changing the unflattering perception of nurses and enhancing its status to the level of respectability of other healthcare professions.

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The Significance of a Name

What is in a name is a question that has been asked since the William Shakespeare era with Juliet’s famous line, “That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.” This quote evoked so many questions and comments as to the value of and expectations associated with a name. The significance of a name has been espoused in the bible to either reveal something about the characteristics, history, or the nature of individuals (I Kings 8:42).

Name as a Unique Individual Identifier

Generally, a name is a word devised to uniquely describe an object, a place, or a person. A mountain or a river is given a name in order to describe it uniquely from other natural features; similarly, villages, towns, and even objects in daily use. Different villages, towns, rivers, and objects often bear the same names. The assigning of a name to a river, mountain, village, or town may derive from historical events, fictional beliefs, or a mere expression of hope and expectations. However, when names are assigned to a person, usually to a child, the name may have many implications. In some societies, a mother wishing success for her child may give the name “doctor, professor, or lawyer” and other professional and prestigious appellations in the hope that the child may achieve such situation in life. Other names may be designed to express a wish and include such names as Beauty, Hope, or Love; and still others may use names to express gratitude or explain circumstances of the child’s birth names such as Gift, Mercy, or Praise. All these emotions, hopes, and expression of birth circumstances are common in assigning children’s names through most societies and

cultural groups in the world (Campbell, 2002; Wurman, 2001).

Name as a Unique Group Identifier

As a name uniquely describes an individual, so it does a group. Citizens of a country are uniquely identified by a name associated with that country. The name associated with this identification of this country is the assumed characteristics of the people of that country. Thus, people from that country may be presumed as well cultured, rich, poor, arrogant, criminal, etc. according to the general obtaining perception of the people of that country. Even within a country, subgroups—ethnic, clan, religious, etc.—may be uniquely identified by a name; and with that name comes believed characteristics, which may or may not be justifiable in reality. Occupational groups such as nurses, doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc. are uniquely identified by names. Such names carry presumed characteristics that may or may not be justified of the persons in the occupational group.

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In occupational groups, names are generally assigned to describe the nature of the work a person in that group does and character perceptions attached. However, in many circumstances, these words are still inadequate to justify the perceptions or the job being done as the occupational circumstances may change from time to time. For example, the name “carpenter” does not adequately describe what it is that is done in carpentry, but it connotes the impression of an artisan with little or no formal training. In situ-

ations like this, practitioners of this occupation are often constrained to add adjectives to the description of their job in order to convey greater respectability or specificity; for example, furniture manufacturer, roof maker, door fixer, or better still, carpentry engineer. All these adjectives help portray what is really being done and give it a higher degree of social acceptability. This sort of scenario applies to the nursing profession. Commonly, the term “nurse” is perceived to be the lowest rank of all the health professionals. It needs to be beefed-up, either in change of name or in putting descriptive adjectives to make it socially acceptable.

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The Case of Nursing

Nursing has for many years struggled with an inner hunger, a deep need for professional congruency and effectiveness. The perception by many people, except those aligned to nursing, see nursing as an inferior and inadequate undertaking to be regarded as a “profession.” Adequate recognition of nursing as a profession has lagged behind; something urgent needs to be done now. The viability of nursing has in some ways contributed to its stagnation or lack of adequate recognition as a profession. The Kabalarian (2004) philosophy emphasizes the importance of a name. This philosophy was referring to a personal name and defines the power associated with a name. For instance, names of persons and even countries convey respect, fear, or power and other social attributes. That is the power in a name. When a name is associated with an individual, certain behaviors

would be expected of that person. Names do carry the weight of expectation. Names create a picture of expectation and reflect the function or perhaps the kind of people associated with the name. A presumptive attitude is usually formed when a name is mentioned.

Could it be that the name “nursing” denotes powerlessness and inferiority?

Nursing as a Professional Name in the Field of Health Care

In the field of health care, nursing is viewed as having a lower status when compared to other health undertakings such as medicine, pharmacy, and psychology. Could it be that the name “nursing” denotes powerlessness and inferiority? Fisher and Schweitzer (1992) studied or tried to understand names and gave very interesting differences between names as in first names or bynames as in other names. Names as in first names are supposed to denote your character and they are long and jovial, whereas bynames (nicknames) are short, direct, earthy, and concrete. Such a description fits well with nursing. Anything earthy is simple, after all the bynames are bestowed upon people. One may therefore wonder where nursing comes from, or who bestowed the name upon the profession. In incidences where nurses demonstrate their commitment and courage, such as in emergencies, for example road accidents, where nurses have to work around the clock to save lives, they will be referred to as “doing their work.” Interestingly, as it was pointed out, when other occupations or professions offer their services, it is usually seen as deserving of praise. For instance, a situation where firefighters spent a night trying to put out a fire, their

action was seen as a heroic, not just doing their job, and the whole community encouraged to join hands in shouting their praise (Mayne, 2003, p. 2). One therefore wonders what nursing could do to change the people’s perception and get the recognition it deserves.

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The Origin of Nursing

The assertion that there is a hidden power in the name is very true. Some names command a lot of respect, and expectation put in different things going by different names. Many nursing scholars have defined nursing as a profession, as a science and as an art (George, 2002; Lauzon, 1995). However, many people still view nursing as less than a profession. Questia, the world largest online library defines nursing as a field in the healthcare profession that assists patients under the direct supervision of medical officers (Questia Online Library, 2005). How unfortunate can such a big online library define nursing as a vocation. Kalofissudis and Van Sell (2004) believed that the nursing profession is still evolving. In its evolution, will it attain the recognition or will it leave the status quo?

Nursing was originally meant for unmarried single women coming from well-to-do families where wealth and prestige were already established (Selelo-Kupe, 1993). This was the origin of nursing. The women had to keep busy and support those less fortunate, and this

was nursing. It set the pace for how nursing would be viewed. Would it be different if what they did was called by a fanciful name such as "nursing engineering" or "healthcare administrator"; something fanciful and long that would denote education and attach some importance to it?

The contents of the professional nursing today and 50 years ago evolved from a humanitarian undertaking to a professional one. As a humanitarian undertaking, formal education was not insisted upon; only the willingness to help sufficed. Today, as a profession, trainee nurses must have preliminary qualifications equivalent to those of medical, pharmaceutical, and other trainees. This would then be followed by 3 years of continuous training.

Nursing education was in the past regarded as an appendage to training in other medical professions; today, nursing education has been recognized as full-fledged university training with the usual compliments of professors, teaching aides, seminars, and workshop to assist in rapid dissemination of developments in nursing practice.

Shifting the Social Outlook on Nursing

Nursing needs to have a social paradigm shift that would assist the world to better perceive, understand, and interpret nursing differently. As it is today, people have a poor perception and understanding about nursing. From the many studies done in nursing, it has become apparent that if we nurses want to make minor changes about the perception of the nursing profession, then we can focus on people's attitude, but because we want a radical change, then we need to work on our basic paradigms. This would take us to the root of the issues nursing has battled with for so long. This is where the world's attitude about nursing comes from; after all, what is on the surface belies what lies underneath.

The few authors quoted in this article convince us of the need to look into the name "nursing" as applied to the profession, but can we change the name or can

nursing continue asserting itself as a comparable profession to others in healthcare; and how long will it take? When one tobacco company changed its name, their clients wondered why, but they had a simple answer: "a name either brings something of value or just sits there." Given the many studies done in nursing and given the slow changing perception about what nursing is, the authors of this article argue that maybe nursing scholars should start thinking of getting a befitting byname to nursing. Hopefully, the byname will give the profession a higher expectation of the practitioners and enhance the status of nursing.

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