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Give the Nursing Profession Its Due

Nurses, though an important cog in the healthcare wheel, do not get the importance or recognition they deserve

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Nursing as a profession demands a delicate balance between the head (intelligence) and the heart (emotions). All nurses, irrespective of their role, do this balancing act in their day-to-day work to offer a positive healthcare experience to patients and help create a healthier and happier world.

The focus of any discussion today regarding nurses is on their work in hospitals and primary care centres, but these are not the only places where they play an active role. Healthcare administration, education and research, [home health care](#), palliative care, school health services, preventive and promotive health, forensics, triaging and emergency care are some of the wide-ranging areas where their expertise is required. Many nurses have also moved into specialized care, while some are even working as application specialists in medical device companies.

Yet, the question of how effectively we as a nation are utilizing the nursing workforce and skills sets at our disposal is a pertinent one. The [International Nurses Day](#)—celebrated on May 12 each year on the birth anniversary of Florence Nightingale—is an opportunity to deliberate upon the many aspects of this noble profession that mandate our attention.

Societal attitudes towards nurses need an overhaul too. Despite being an integral part of the [healthcare system](#), nurses feel unappreciated and sidelined. Ask any nurse and she will say there are three things lacking in her day-to-day life—timely meals, downtime and, most importantly, gratitude from those she serves. It is not unusual for nurses to work back-to-back shifts without a break. A nurse is always on call, and the call of duty always comes first.

Due to the acute shortage of nursing staff in India, most nurses remain overwhelmed with work. As more and more hospitals seek accreditation, they are putting systems and processes in place to make their

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operations more organized and efficient. Though a welcome move, this puts the time-consuming burden of documentation on nurses, in addition to their other duties, though I must agree that systems have improved owing to the quality movement.

The looming need for specialized nurses is an area that requires urgent consideration. Most people fail to reflect on the intellectual challenges faced by nurses today. The knowledge gap between a doctor and nurse is already huge, and widening rapidly. The medical profession has branched into specialization and super-specialization, but nursing is still a general science with limited opportunities for professional or intellectual growth. The new trend of allied healthcare professionals has led to the nursing profession being put on the backburner, even as India grapples with a shortfall of nurses.

Compassion is a key component of nursing. People in the profession of helping others often get affected by the emotions of those whom they serve, leading to what is called 'compassion fatigue.' This is a common phenomenon among nurses and has gained a lot of attention in the West. If not identified early on, it can lead to burn-out and de-personalization—a key cause of insensitive behavior towards patients exhibited by some nurses. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges in healthcare is to preserve the attitude of selfless service of professionals.

The sensitive work of nurses needs to be nurtured with positive reinforcements and tokens of appreciation. This is something that cannot be completely remunerated with monetary benefits alone. For this reason, we have started a unique program at the Amrita Hospital in which patients who want to say "thank you" to the nurses for the care they have been given are asked to put it in writing. These letters are shared with the nurses, making them feel appreciated and acknowledged for their hard work. It also helps foster a culture of gratitude towards each other.

Not all patients are the same however. Nurses are as much vulnerable to incidents of patient rage and violence as doctors. Across the country, they bear the brunt of disgruntled patients on one side and hospital administrators on the other, as they are considered soft targets. The root cause of this lies in our patriarchal mindset.

Despite these challenges, nurses continue to work diligently to deliver safe and quality healthcare to everyone. Nursing leaders have been devoting a significant amount of effort to preserve the positive attitude of nurses towards their responsibilities and alter the outlook of the society towards the nursing profession. But for them to be successful, collaborative team work by all stakeholders is imperative, driven by a deep desire to preserve the art and science of helping others heal.

The author is the Nursing Director at [Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences](#), Kochi

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