

# Public service: Experienced nurses' views on social and civic responsibility

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**Socially engaged nurses participate in public service because of their strong sense of civic and social responsibility. Public service within the profession of nursing has a historical mandate but is not well described in the literature. The purpose of this study was to describe how experienced nurses contribute nursing knowledge in public service, rationale for their service, and types of service activities. This article reports on a subset of data from a larger qualitative study<sup>1</sup> exploring the meaning of scholarly nursing practice within the practice setting. Thirty-six nurses were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. The major finding of this study is that all participants fully embraced the concept of public service as an integral component of their professional identity. Data were organized around the themes of what participants did in their public service and why they did it. Participants viewed public service as their responsibility as a professional nurse.**

**S**ocially engaged nurse citizens participate in public service because of their strong sense of social and civic responsibility. Public service within the profession of nursing has a historical mandate that centers on a nursing paradigm that places special emphasis on knowledge, individual responsibility, autonomy, and altruism, or during formative education and continuing throughout one's career.<sup>2-5</sup> According to Henderson, "The most successful preparation of nurses will always include whatever gives them the broadest possible understanding of humanity and the world in which they live."<sup>6</sup> Public service as a core component of a nurse's professional identity is not well-understood or described in the literature.

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## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to describe how experienced nurses contribute nursing knowledge in the service of the public, their rationale for their service, and the types of public service activities that they have undertaken.

## BACKGROUND

Why nurses might assume the obligation for public service is rooted in their codes of ethics and professional standards. In these documents and within our history, the values that support professional identity are explicit in terms of social justice, human dignity, integrity, and altruism.<sup>7-10</sup> The link between public service and the nurse's professional identity has been minimally described in the literature.

There is a small body of literature that addresses professionalism and professional identity in nurses' work life, but this literature has limited discussion of public service as an integral component of the nursing role. Calling for a "reassessment of professionalism in nursing,"<sup>11</sup> Wynd studied registered nurses' attitudes toward professionalism using Hall's Professionalism Identity Scale. The instrument includes 5 subscales, one of which is public service. The results from this study suggested that "nurses with the greatest amount of experience (31–53 yrs) had the highest mean score for overall professionalism"<sup>11</sup> as well as belief in public service. Nurses' beliefs in the value of public service earned the highest mean of all the subscale scores. This study, however, did not address how the nurse translates belief in public service into meaningful activities that fulfill social and civic responsibility.

Professional identity development in the work setting was the focus of 2 studies.<sup>12,13</sup> Participants in these studies were nurses with 1–10 years of practice experience. Deppoliti<sup>12</sup> found that the development of a nurse's professional identity in the first 3 years of practice was linked to a sense of responsibility for others. The Fagermoen study,<sup>13</sup> which focused on professional values nurses associated with professional identity, reported that human dignity was a core value in nurses' practice. Nurses identified altruism as the overall philosophy guiding their practice.

In a systematic international literature review of 32 studies focusing on key words Horton, Tschudin, and

Forget<sup>14</sup> identified 8 themes including: “professional identity,” “values in nursing,” and “organization values.” These themes clustered around one’s professional role, value, values and culture, personal, moral and organization values. Although altruism was included in the concept of value, there was no language in this extensive literature review that addressed public service as a value, responsibility, or professional identity for nurses. The meaning of public service for nurses in practice, reasons for their undertaking such work, as well as the kinds of service in which nurses engage, has not been discussed in the literature.

## METHOD

### *Design*

This article reports on a sub-set of data from a larger qualitative study<sup>1</sup> that empirically explored the meaning of scholarly nursing practice as viewed by experienced nurses in the practice setting. The original study used a qualitative descriptive research design that is recognized to be useful in uncovering the meaning of undescribed elements within a phenomenon.<sup>15</sup> This report describes the perspectives of experienced nurses on public service to others as their social and civic responsibility.

### *Sample and Setting*

Following institutional review board approvals, institutional nursing leaders from 3 tertiary medical centers and 1 community hospital in the northeastern United States identified nurses who had achieved the highest rank on the institutional clinical ladder or who had received a competitive institutional-based award for clinical practice excellence. Using these criteria, the researchers purposefully recruited 36 nurses by letter. Sampling from different practice settings “maximized the variation of responses from experienced nurses.”<sup>1</sup>

### *Instrument*

A semi-structured interview guide was used. For the purpose of this report, the key question explored in-depth with participants was “Do you use nursing knowledge outside the workplace, and if so, how?” Probing questions to more fully understand nurses’ responses were asked.

### *Procedure and Data Analysis*

All interviews were conducted by the researchers at the workplace. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by a professionally trained transcriptionist. The data were managed using NVIVO™.<sup>16</sup> The researchers used qualitative content analysis<sup>17-18</sup> to reach full consensus on all codes and themes. This method included: (1) an in-depth reading of all transcripts to achieve overall understanding of language and meaning, (2) in-depth reading of one transcript from each setting to identify major codes, and (3) the

development of a codebook with definitions, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and supporting text. The researchers rigorously compared coded text from multiple interviews to establish inter-reader reliability.<sup>19</sup> Next, researchers read and coded all transcripts. The final step in the content analysis was the clustering of codes into themes. More than 3/4 of the participants used language that supported the identified themes. An audit trail and member-checking<sup>19</sup> were then utilized to verify findings.<sup>1</sup>

## RESULTS

### *Description of the Participants*

The sample included 36 female registered nurses with a mean age of 47 years (range 36-54) and with a mean of 24 years of experience (range 15-38). By self-report, the majority held professional practice certifications and were highly educated, with 97% having a bachelor’s degree and 47% a master’s degree. These nurses worked between 24–40 hours per week, primarily as direct caregivers. All were active on hospital committees and/or in their professional organizations.

### *Findings*

The major finding of this analysis is that all of the participants fully embraced the concept of public service as an integral component of their professional identity. Data were organized around the themes of what participants did in their public service and why they did it. All participants elaborated on the many kinds of public service activities in which they were involved. These activities clustered around 3 domains: clinician, social justice advocate, and community knowledge consultant. Furthermore, all participants described their reasons for undertaking public service. The reasons for participating in public service clustered around 4 major domains: (1) public service is a natural extension of work; (2) public service improves practice; (3) public service feels good; and, (4) public service is a way of giving back.

**Public Service Activities. Clinician.** Integral to the domain of *clinician* are caregiving activities delivered by nurses in the community. Nursing knowledge and clinical expertise underpinned the clinical work that nurses did in service to the public. Participants used their clinical skills as nurses in a variety of settings outside of the workplace. Participants volunteered in the role of clinical nurse at summer camps, schools, and on health care teams committed to responding to large-scale crises such as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, and national and international relief efforts such as the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. When referring to the World Trade Center attacks, one participant stated, “It was easier for me to go down to New York to work there than to be here thinking about it. I am a doer. It was easier for me to be volunteering there than to be sitting here wishing I could help.”

All participants reported that their neighborhood was a locale for using their clinical skills. Populations served in their neighborhoods included: seniors, the homeless, new mothers, school children and parents, to name a few. One nurse shared, "I had a neighbor who arrested at home and I went over and did CPR. I was there before the ambulance arrived." Another stated, "We all find ourselves in the role where your neighbor or somebody you know is calling because he or she got hurt." She continued, "My neighbors call me constantly for the kids bumping their heads." Another nurse shared, "For a long time I was a volunteer working with the homeless. For more than 12 years, I provided nursing care to the homeless." Another nurse was the "unofficial parish nurse in [her] community." She was a link to health care for her parish.

**Social Justice Advocate.** Integral to the domain of *social justice advocate* were activities undertaken that address barriers to social equity. As social justice advocates, the majority of participants informed us that the level of public service outreach encompassed working on governmental affairs committees, setting up educational conferences for vulnerable populations, advocating for the homeless, and developing healthcare policy. One participant described her role as a volunteer in a medical van. She spoke of her service work with homeless individuals who had received the diagnosis of cancer. She explained, "A couple of them had cancer and just couldn't get their heads around what was being said. So I offered to go over to the treatment facility with each one and said, 'We will listen together and see if we can understand what they are saying.'" She assumed the role of advocate for each individual as they took the journey through cancer diagnosis and treatment.

Being a nurse added an important and interesting dimension to social advocacy. One participant described her work as an activist in establishing a statewide initiative around access to insurance for reproductive health care for women. Committed to the use of political action, she was successful in lobbying legislators, insurance companies, and public interest groups to bring "a nursing perspective on what a good health care plan should include." Another nurse shared her work in voter registration. "I try to get people registered to vote. I use health care issues to help them. I say, 'Do you want this to happen? Then we have to do something about it.' I try to bring my nursing into my town."

**Community Knowledge Consultant.** Integral to the domain of *community knowledge consultant* was the use of nursing knowledge to help others to promote their own wellness and prevent illness. As community knowledge consultants, every participant described experiences where they used their knowledge as a nurse outside of the workplace. Formal and informal consulting activities took place at churches, schools, scouting activities, sports events, community associations, and social events. These consultations focused on health

and wellness as well as illness. One participant is one of 2 nurses in her church. "We run workshops and give them at the church. A few months ago, I gave one on stress reduction to 100 women."

Participants acknowledged that people in the community knew that they were nurses. Members of the community believed that they, as nurses, were highly knowledgeable about health care issues and available for guidance. As a result, they were regularly sought-after for advice. The following quotation from one participant is representative of statements made by all of the participants: "I am a resource. People call me with questions and referrals. They call me about all kinds of problems." This same participant continued, "People think that I am attentive and interested in helping them. You know, the things that people appreciate about me in work are what they appreciate about me outside of work." Another stated, "As soon as your neighbors know that you are a nurse, they tap right into you for help."

Listening was identified as a key attribute to the knowledge consultant role. Listening was linked to knowing how to help others. One participant stated, "They know I'll listen to them and if I can, [I] help them because I see in them the need to be helped. I'll say to them, 'what would make it better? What are some things that you can do [to help yourself]?' " She continued, "And sometimes in our chatting, I take whatever they say and give back knowledge and comfort."

**Rationale for Participation in Public Service. Public service is a natural extension of work.** Service to and for others was a part of participants' understanding of their responsibility of being a professional nurse. Experienced nurses explained that participation in service activities was a natural extension of their work as nurses. Participants spoke about how work experiences with their patients made them more sensitive to the needs of the public. Nurses reported that, because they cared passionately about social and health issues, they engaged in public service activities. For one nurse, the common theme in her public service work was caring. She said, "I think that it is just a caring thing and I think that I care just as much in the workplace as outside." Nurses discussed that the nature of nursing and a sense of caring underpinned their work, whether at the workplace or in public service. When considering the similarities between her practice and her public service, one participant stated, "You can never not be a nurse once you are a nurse. Really you cannot. There is a part of you that just comes out and wants to help." This participant reflected the view of others that she is a nurse wherever she is.

The relationship between their work life and their public service was integrated and tightly connected. One participant stated, "I think working in the environment that we work, working with people who are sick and who die really changes you. It makes you a different person." She continued to explain the connection

between her work life from her role as a contributor to her community, saying, "To be honest, I am not sure that I could ever separate the two." Participants believed that the core competencies required of a clinical nurse translate to all aspects of their work and public service. For example, participants referred to teaching, assessment, relationship building, communication, and caregiving as important skill sets both within and outside of the workplace.

**Public Service improves my practice.** Uncovering the circular and dynamic relationship that participants described—between using knowledge learned in the workplace for public service and returning knowledge learned in service to the workplace—is a unique finding. Nurses spoke eloquently about the seamless connection between their work life and service to the public. Speaking about growing her expertise in the public service sector, one nurse summed up this connection when she said, "Whatever you are doing [in public service], you find opportunities to investigate your practice if not completely change it."

Participants who had specific work-related expertise translated that work expertise into public service work. Work-related expertise for this sample of experienced nurses included clinical practice, committee work, patient teaching, and unit management. For example, one participant shared that she was very active on the ethics committee at her workplace, collaborating with physicians and other providers on analyzing patient care issues. She then described how she used this expertise as a board member on a community-based committee focused on ethical issues within the committee work. She continued, "I did that for several years and I learned more and more through my board work... I was always able to incorporate what I learned [in the board work] into my practice." She brought this knowledge and experience back to the workplace, completing the circular relationship between the work role and public service.

**Public service makes me feel good.** Nurses described the dimensions of personal reward that they experienced while involved in public service activities. Personal reward had many facets: importance of service, extension of self, feeling valued, gift-giving, and reaching out. One participant stated, "I like to be a part of [public service] activities. I am a collaborator. I get involved for something that is important to me and useful to others." Participants viewed public service as way of "sharing who I am and what I have become through work. I can't separate my personal and professional lives anymore; they just complement each other. It just makes me feel good." One nurse viewed public service as a way of moving herself out beyond her work life from what she called "your own little world" to a different place that has a need for her work. Another participant spoke of offering her professional nursing expertise in breastfeeding as a gift to her workplace colleagues who were also new

mothers. She said, "I feel it is important...because it is my way of giving them a gift. I tell them you call me—I don't care what time it is—and I feel that it is important that they be well-supported." Other participants spoke of setting an example. "I like to set an example of myself so that others can follow what I am doing." She continued, "You feel like what you are doing is valued." It was clear from the diversity of responses, personal reward made individuals feel good about their public service. Although the dimensions of service activities varied, there was common agreement on the personal rewards of public service to others.

**Public service is a way of giving back.** Several participants spoke of feelings of wanting to make a difference for others when they participated in public service activities. For this sample, the key facet was giving back to others. One nurse's words summed up the reflections of several nurses in this sample when she said, "[Public service] is gratifying. I like to feel that somebody's life is going to be better because of something I know or can do." Another nurse spoke of public service as a ministry. "We have so much—we have to give back." Giving back as the driving motive was summed up by another participant who volunteered in Hurricane Katrina relief. "It wasn't about the glory. We didn't go there to play politics. We went there to open up the hospital and treat patients. Giving back was unbelievable." That giving back to others had no boundaries in place or time is summed up by one participant, "Whether you are in Target or the hospital, it is just this feeling of wanting to be of help. It is very deep; it comes up all the time...on vacation...having pizza, or after work."

## DISCUSSION

These 36 nurse participants confirmed that public service was a clear and strong personal expectation for themselves as professional nurses. They identified a wide range of public service activities and shared their reasons for undertaking such activities. They described the relationship between patient-focused practice in the workplace and public service-focused practice outside of a professional setting. They did not, however, identify their formative nursing education or their workplace as a contributor to this public service dimension of their professional identity.

The finding that clinical scholars report that knowledge learned in public service informs and enhances their clinical practice and their professional identity is intriguing. The idea that clinical practice can improve from humanitarian contributions outside of the workplace confirms the importance of including aspects of public service in professional nursing education and ongoing career development. The American Nurses Association Credentialing Corporation (ANCC) Magnet Recognition Program<sup>20</sup> identifies 5 components of a model that demonstrate excellence in nursing. While none of these directly address the nurse's responsibility

for public service, 2 of the 5 model components (Transformational Leadership and Exemplary Professional Practice) focus on the importance of nursing leadership in shaping the vision of the organization, and a comprehensive understanding and application of the nursing role with patients, families, and the community. Findings from this study indicate that clinical practice is enhanced by participation in public service activities. The circular and dynamic relationship between knowledge used in public service and knowledge returned to the workplace calls for a broadening of the institutional professional practice model to embrace public service in strengthening professional practice. We propose that the ANCC New Magnet Model include language that more explicitly supports the relationship of public service to the organization's vision and its impact on quality of care.

The study sample found that participation in public service activities was rewarding. The desire to give to others and the ability to do so effectively raises esteem and respect for the profession. Spitzer<sup>21</sup> called for nurses to assume broader roles both in "internal" communities in which they work and in "external" communities in which they live. "By reaching out and caring for the broader community, nurses have the opportunity to grow while communities benefit from their participatory caring."<sup>21</sup> Nurses in this study confirmed that the strong relationship between their work and using nursing knowledge in their public service activities was both personally and professionally rewarding. What is interesting and not well-understood in the literature is why professional nurses identify the importance of public service on both a personal and professional level. While nursing is predominantly a female profession, the relationship of gender to personal and professional reward cannot be explained by these findings.

None of the participants spoke of experiences in their formative education that fostered service to others as a social and civic responsibility of the profession of nursing. Nurses in this study were highly experienced with a mean of 24 years of experience. Service learning as a structured pedagogical approach to the educational process, though well-described in the literature of the last decade,<sup>22-27</sup> perhaps was not part of their formative education. Service learning as pedagogy contributes to the student's acquisition of knowledge and skills integral to professional practice. But it does not support nursing students engaging in autonomous exercise of civic and social responsibility through the rendering of public service activities for the sake of others. If civic and social responsibility is part of the professional nursing role, is it time for formative education to re-conceptualize how it develops the character of the emerging professional to become local and global citizens with a commitment to providing public service? The link between service learning and lifelong public service is not clear. The importance of public

service as an independent responsibility of the student as a future clinician is also not well-articulated in the literature.

Nursing has a rich history of supporting social activism to address both social injustices and humanitarian needs. According to Watson,<sup>28</sup> the profession must now re-examine its roots to foster activism and to develop nurse activists that will serve the broader society. "This is what nursing has always brought to communities, to humanity, to the world as its highest ethical commitment."

### *Implications*

If public service is one of the cornerstones of the nursing profession,<sup>29</sup> it can be expected that a commitment to public service would span a career. Beginning with formative education and continuing throughout the nurse's care progression, public service should be explicitly valued by the profession, including practitioners, educators, and leaders. Specifically, education throughout the tiers of formal education and continuing as life-long learning must openly support the principles and value of public service. Public service as a value in professional role identity needs to be more clearly developed and articulated to insure that the clinicians of tomorrow will assume civic and social engagement outside the workplace. Workplaces need to support public service as part of career advancement. The caring nature of nurse work adds a natural extension into the realm of public service.

Future research should include an extension of this work to include a wide range of practice settings, geographic locations, and a gender-mixed sample. Public service as a central professional value across the globe needs examination. A national survey in the practice arena would identify the presence of the concept of public service in mission and values language as well as a key component for career advancement. A similar survey in higher education would identify current and future best practices in pedagogy to support public service as an expectation in the development of professional identity. A longitudinal study examining outcomes of student experiences within a context of public service could explore the relationship between professional role identity development and lifelong participation in public service activities.

In conclusion, nurses are willing contributors in public service, exercising a clear social and civic responsibility. Elevating service as a cornerstone of the profession of nursing "raises the benchmark for professional service activities to include responsibility, accountability and contribution to society."<sup>29</sup> It is a legacy and the future of the profession of nursing.

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