



Aotearoa New Zealand nurses and national health policy: Navigating a new professional space

Ngā Tapuhi o Aotearoa me ngā kaupapahere hauora ā-motu: Te whakatere i tētahi ara ngaio hou

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In October 2019, the College of Nurses Aotearoa (NZ) collaborated on a health policy workshop for nurses, bringing together experts from New Zealand Treasury, the World Health Organization (WHO), the New Zealand Institute for Economic Research (NZIER) and key nurse leaders. This workshop provided foundational knowledge on policy and political decision making and the role that nurses can take in directing and leading health policy. This knowledge is important given the increasing emphasis on the contribution of nurses addressing universal health coverage by 2030 (WHO, 2020) and what has been described as the absence of the nursing voice in the policy and political landscape (Clayton-Hathway et al., 2020). There is a call for nurses globally to become more informed and engaged at health policy level (Daly et al., 2020; Jackson, 2020).

2020 is designated the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife and has seen the release of the *State of the World's Nursing* report (WHO, 2020). It has also been the year of COVID-19 and around the world nurses have received higher levels of media exposure than ever, predominantly as heroes battling on the front

lines (Bennett et al., 2020). But there has also been, in 2020, unprecedented exposure for nursing leadership, for example: Howard Catton, Chief Executive of the International Council of Nurses (2020) appeared on the BBC; Zenei Cortez, Co-President of National Nurses United appeared on Amanpour (2020); Ruth May, England's Chief Nurse, presented in a UK daily COVID-19 briefing (York, 2020), and Dame Donna Kinnair, Chief Nurse of the Royal College of Nursing in the United Kingdom, appeared on BBC Question Time (Ng & Cockburn, 2020). However, in Aotearoa New Zealand, there has been limited exposure for national nursing leadership during the COVID-19 response. Despite being the largest professional health workforce, nursing still lacks primacy in policy circles (Clendon, 2019).

Nurses are functioning across the entire pandemic response, at clinical, operational, and strategic levels. At the same time, the normal day to day work of the healthcare system carries on and nurses throughout the sector continue to work in a variety of clinical and non-clinical roles, including research, education, management, and policy. The role nurses play in policy development is so highly valued, that in 2007 the Nursing Council of New Zealand (NCNZ) created competencies specifically

Manning, E., & Krieble, T. (2020). Aotearoa New Zealand nurses and national health policy: Navigating a new professional space [Editorial]. *Nursing Praxis in Aotearoa New Zealand*, 36(3), 4-6. <https://doi.org/10.36951/27034542.2020.010>

for those nurses who work in policy roles. Despite this, there are still very few nurses working in the practice area of policy (NCNZ, 2019).

Current policy-based designated nursing positions are limited to the Chief Nursing Officer in the Ministry of Health and senior roles within the NCNZ. Nurses are not involved enough in national health policy development, even when the topic under review directly relates to nursing work and/or nurses (Carryer, 2020). As reflected by Dr Jill Clendon, in her role as Acting Chief Nursing Officer, Ministry of Health, “We need to be more politically savvy and advocate for change from a professional lens, speaking with politicians on all sides of the fence about the practice of nursing...” (Clendon, 2019, p. 6). The result is that policy and political views are missing expert nursing knowledge which could significantly improve outcomes for the Aotearoa New Zealand public. We argue that to make changes to include a nursing voice, nurse leaders first need to know how to successfully function in a policy environment.

To be effective at a policy level, nurses need to understand how the machinery of government works and in particular know where decision-making power lies. In the case of central government policy roles, this means understanding what decisions Cabinet makes (for example, funding, regulation, legislation) and what rests elsewhere. It also entails an understanding of the policy process starting with clear problem definition and/or objective and working through analysis of options against frameworks; such as the Health Quality and Safety Commission’s (2020) triple aim of equity, efficiency, and quality.

Nurses can offer a distinct advantage in policy roles because they can rise above the system and ‘see it all’ from the interface with medicine, patients, families, allied health professionals, and social service providers. Nurses

are systems integrators. Increasingly in public policy and health policy, the ability to integrate perspectives and deploy practical coordination skills are in high demand. All of the hard-to-solve social policy issues sit on the boundary between policy domains. Nurses see this intuitively, for example in the link between health and education outcomes, or health and justice outcomes.

Dame Margaret Bazley is an example of how a nurse leader can make a significant impact working in public service. She served successive governments as Chief Executive of the Ministries of Transport and of Social Welfare (National Library of New Zealand, 2020). Dame Bazley deeply understood the need to connect policy and practice in the real world. So, to make progress in the strategic policy space, we need to consider barriers and opportunities for nursing. The barriers include a lack of training; a complex profession with many differing agendas and goals; and a profession that is still normatively feminine. As Clendon (2019) states: “We have to stop complaining about not being around the table and find ways to demonstrate what happens when we are not at the table, so we become indispensable” (p. 6). We would also argue that the ‘table’ needs to change. If nursing voices are not being heard, then policy spaces must emerge from their ossified states to evolve and grow to recognise and encompass this expert workforce.

It is important to create education which can teach nurses a new policy language and prepare them to work in strategic local and national roles. Currently, tertiary education-based postgraduate courses specifically target nurses interested in public policy, and in 2019 a successful one-day Health Policy workshop for nurses was run by the College of Nurses Aotearoa (NZ) (Manning, 2019). Speakers from the WHO, New Zealand Treasury, Massey University, and NZIER brought a refreshing look at the realities of policy, new language, and new

information to a group of nurse leaders from around Aotearoa New Zealand and across practice settings. Ongoing collaboration, including internships, connecting those working in policy with tertiary education and professional development will help prepare nurses for work in policy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen nurses around the world becoming more visible, with calls for increased engagement in policy. With most health outcomes sitting across a broad sweep of social policy areas such as housing, justice, and education, nurses are well suited to expand their scope of influence to address these challenges.

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