



Rising above polarising discourses within nursing

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What has been laid bare by Wilkinson (2008a, 2008b) is the grim struggle for power and control within nursing. She describes tension between *a discourse of autonomy* and *a discourse of unionism*. The former privileges the individual nurse's right to autonomous practice, and the latter is a collective approach to secure optimal conditions for all nurses. While we cannot know how these tensions impacted the development of nursing, we do know the nurse practitioner (NP) workforce in particular, has been slow to materialise.

Over the past year the global voice of nursing has strengthened, with the notable activism and leadership of the International Council of Nurses, advocating for both professional autonomy and matters such as safe staffing, pay and conditions. The State of the World's Nursing report (WHO, 2020) and campaigns like Nursing Now provide ample evidence to support the critical role nurses play in tackling global healthcare challenges. The global nursing narrative is one that encapsulates concepts of autonomous practice and working conditions. In Aotearoa however, both historically and contemporaneously the collective nursing's voice is ambiguous and appears at times divided with professional tensions playing out in both social and mainstream media.

Reflecting on both Wilkinson's arguments and global nursing activism, it is clear that discourses of autonomy and unionism need not be dichotomous rivals, and both can offer much to the profession. Fortunately, the creativity and collegiality shown by nurses in Aotearoa during the COVID-19 crisis show that they can transcend polarising discourses. This transcendence leads to professional growth and a hope for the future of nursing.

Hope flourishes in the presence of shared adversity such as a global pandemic. Hope springs from collective vision and shared values. It is both vision and values that guide nurses in knowing what to



do in times of crisis. Such professional clarity and direction, muted in a business-as-usual world, are amplified in a COVID-19 world. The polarising discourses described by Wilkinson fade into the background, replaced instead with clarity, collegiality, and purpose. This gives rise to a new more confident nursing voice, enabling the profession to forge ahead and deliver person-centred healthcare: a social mandate to be realised.

References

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