

REVIEW ARTICLE

VANGUARD IN GLOBAL HEALTH – HELPING NURSES IN COMBATING GLOBAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

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Summary

While everyone has differences in priorities, one aspect which people usually put onto top positions is our health. As the most numerous group among medical professionals, nurses are usually among the first in which people seeking medical help come into contact with. As such, they are an essential asset, though their contributions are often not valued enough. With the world becoming more and more connected, national health issues such as climate change, maternal health or human trafficking, or transmissible diseases are taking on a global scale, with the COVID-19 pandemic highlighting such developments. To provide healthcare for the people affected, nurses need to have the best conditions possible, which requires the challenges in the nursing field to be addressed as soon as possible. These challenges include nursing shortages, inequalities or education which is not able to keep up with globalizing. The possible policy solutions include raising salaries or providing social securities, which could address nursing shortages, and implementing global health concepts in nursing curricula, connected to more possibilities for nursing students to experience healthcare in other countries. Such solutions, coupled with boosting the status of the nursing profession and giving nurses bigger voice in policymaking can result in bigger numbers of well-educated nursing professionals, which will strongly improve overall global health prospects.

Key words: nursing; global health; global nursing; global challenges; policy solutions

Introduction

One of the aspects of life we care about the most is our health. During our birthdays or even with different toasts, we wish each other “good health” in one way or another. However, nothing is perfect, and nobody is healthy all their life. As soon as we start feeling unwell and cannot solve the situation with home remedies or drugs at hand, we take a trip and go see our medical professional. Most of the time, even in casual conversations, we talk about how we are going to “see a doctor”. However, if the whole medical system relied only on doctors, almost no one would get access to medical care. This is where the vanguard in combating health issues, nurses, come into play. Usually being the first to interact with people who are seeking medical help, their contribution is unmistakable,

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as they make up half the global health workforce (1). The challenges medical professionals, doctors, nurses, and many others face are numerous. Transmissible or non-transmissible diseases, injuries, epidemics are to name but a few. These all are exacerbated due to globalization, which speeds up the flow of information, goods services or people, and creates new economic, political and social spaces (2). As the world is more connected than ever before, issues that would have been local or regional in the past have now become global ones. For example, communicable diseases do not care about borders or other boundaries, and have huge potential for global spread as seen with recent SARS epidemic (3), H1N1 influenza A virus (4) or the newest COVID-19 (5), which paralyzed almost every country. These new concerns gave rise to terms such as “global health”, in which all nations must participate in order for the situation to improve. As mentioned, nurses are the biggest group among the workforce, and as such also contributing with their share to this fight for global health. As a result, even nursing has become more supranational and known as “global nursing”. Nursing also has its own challenges which it has to combat, and that makes it harder to respond to the global health ones. The aim of this work will be to propose policies which will help nursing tackle its own challenges, and to subsequently allow nursing to respond to the global health concerns with bigger efficiency.

In the first part of this work, the terms “global health” and “global nursing” will be more closely defined. As these terms do not have one undisputable definition, it is important to clear as much confusion as possible. Clearer definitions make it easier to respond to issues, as there is a clear delineated space in which the issues need addressing. Later on, current global health challenges will be laid out, with emphasis also on the newest and the most pressing one in the form of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. Apart from concerns regarding global health, attention will be given to challenges which afflict (global) nursing, mostly education, migration and resulting nursing shortages. After the contextual framework is laid out, some policy suggestions will be presented to improve global nursing. As I will argue, improving the situation of nurses can help a huge deal in addressing global health challenges as well.

Definitions

In the following paragraphs, the terms “global health” and “global nursing” will be defined more closely, as there is a lack of consensus on their meaning, which hinders possible progress towards solutions to the concerns of both areas.

Global health

Global health is a fairly new term, which has been gaining traction in the preceding years, and some authors even claim that “did not really exist even 20 years ago” (6). Of course, it did not appear out of the blue, but rather evolved from concepts such as public and international health, while those were preceded by even older concepts of tropical medicine and hygiene (7). Bozorgmehr et al. (8) describe the evolution of the view of global health from emphasizing developmental aid, to a focus on international interdependence, and on valuing health as a universal human right. As its usage is becoming more widespread, more and more academic centers use it with their titles to describe their interests (although it is worth noting that most of these are located in high-income countries) (9). Despite its rise in popularity and efforts in conceptualizing the concept of global health, it still lacks a unified definition on which all would agree, and which would be used by a majority of scholars or policymakers. However, some authors are even skeptical about defining the term altogether. For example, Engebretsen and Heggen (10) argue that the definition would homogenize a world, or that it depends on a “definer” and is likely to change over time (11). Other authors are advocating the exact opposite, as it can be used to guide the development of global health programmes (2,7,9). One of the most cited definitions, which Koplan et al. proposed, defines global health as “an area of study, research and practice that places a priority on improving health and achieving health equity for all people worldwide” (7). Beaglehole and Bonita propose a shortened definition: “collaborative trans-national research and action for promoting health for all” (9). After analyzing numerous research articles, Wilson et al. propose a longer definition, which also encompasses planetary health, ecosystem health, transnational health issues etc. (11).

Global nursing

Regarding global nursing, even less work has been concerned with defining this term, and most authors work with the term by integrating general descriptions about the roles of the professional nurses with the aims of global

health (11). The themes most frequently used together with global nursing entail interdependence, collaboration, “glocal” (meaning connecting global and local health), advocacy, caring and others (11). For example, Grootjans and Newman (12) connect the first four abovementioned terms to global nursing, when they see global nursing closely connected to globalization, how it affects professional nurses in their professions, and how nursing needs to adapt to this new order. Synthetizing the literature and using collective experiences, Wilson et al. came with a definition incorporating the aforementioned themes. Global nursing then entails, among others, promoting sustainable planetary health and equity for all people, considering social determinants, engaging in ethical practice, demonstrating respect for dignity and engaging in partnerships with communities (11). In other words, nursing in global view should work with people to promote health, prevent illness and provide care at all times on macro levels (worldwide and supraterritorially) (2).

Challenges

After both concepts, global health and global nursing, have been more clearly defined, the main challenges which beset them will be introduced, in order to be able to formulate policies which could help with combating them.

Global health challenges

Prior to the huge globalization the world is now experiencing, which allows information, people or goods to travel more and faster than ever, most of the health issues would take a form of national, or probably regional ones. But as the world is becoming more interconnected, the outlook on health challenges also changes, as they transcend national or even regional boundaries. These include, though are not limited to, communicable (6,13) and non-communicable diseases (2), human trafficking (13), maternal and newborn health (13) or climate change (14). Among those, the one currently standing out the most is the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the whole world and has put health systems under huge pressure (5). It was preceded by other viral infections, some of which include severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2002, swine H1N1 influenza A in 2009, or the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) in 2012. However, none of those were of such scale as the novel coronavirus, which reminded us how much viral pathogens not only threaten public health in a particular state (4), but can also affect any country in the world, ignoring distances among countries. But despite the fact that the COVID-19 is currently in the spotlight, the current challenges did not lose their importance. Another emerging global health issue, which Edmondson et al. identified is human trafficking, which is perceived as modern-day slavery (13). It is also the second largest organized crime network in the world (after drug trade). Its growth is even quicker, and it is expected to overtake drug trade in a matter of years. The financial gains are estimated to be around 44 billion U.S. dollars annually (13). Another very pressing issue is poor maternal health, with tens of millions of women suffering from insufficient health care both during pregnancy, and during and after childbirth (15). This issue is the most prevalent in poorer countries and fragile states, with the gap between groups of countries with poor maternal health and those with better prospects widening each year (15). This issue is, however, not limited to low-income countries, as the United States has the worst outlook out of all developed states, with the situation worsening each year (13).

Global nursing challenges

As mentioned earlier, professionally educated nurses are numerically the largest group among health professionals in most countries, and comprise half the global health workforce. As a result of this, to provide population all around the world with proper care, skilled nurses are essential (16). The World Health Organization is predicting an increase in global demand for health and social care staff, when around 40 million jobs will be created around 2030 (1). However, the supply will apparently not be able to meet these demands. One of the main challenges for global nursing is therefore, put simply, nursing shortage. This is not a new issue by any means, as there “almost always seems to be a “shortage” of nurses” (17). By some accounts, this dissonance in supply and demand has triggered a global health problem (16). In 2013, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that the world will be 12,9 million nurses short by 2035, and today the updated figure expects a 7,2 million shortage (13), which is still staggering. And while these improvements can give us a sense of security, it is not reason enough for complacency, as these shortages will still have disproportionate impacts on poorer regions, such as Africa (1). Another important factor that impacts the number of nurses available is the aging of the nursing workforce (17), and the 2013 WHO report is predicting that within 10 years, 40 % of nurses will leave their jobs (16). Nursing

in general, and nurses will have their situation made even more challenging due to global demographic changes and the aging of the populations, as the number of people aged 60 and over will grow from 901 million (2015) to 1,4 billion in 2030. That is a 56% increase, coupled with the expected doubling of the number of seniors to nearly 2.1 billion by 2050 (16). The older population is expected to be more demanding with regards to long-term medical care. Coupled with the lesser caregiving capacities of families, the demand for qualified medical workers will be even higher (16). To add to the issue, most of the increase in global population is expected to happen in Africa or countries with populations that are already large. In years 2015-2050, half of the population growth is expected to be happening in India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, United Republic of Tanzania, United States of America, Indonesia and Uganda (13). Out of all these nine countries, only United States can be considered a high-income country, which gives it more options on how to deal with challenges. This does not mean the United States does not face the same challenge of nursing shortages. Other high-income countries in the same situation include Great Britain (largest shortage), Germany, Canada, Japan, United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia (16). This goes to show that nursing shortages are not only an issue of the poorer countries, but also a truly global challenge. Another concern connected to these shortages is maldistribution, which usually exacerbates the former. This is not a new phenomenon, as the bigger number of professionals seek work in middle-class urban areas (13). As a result of this, people in rural areas face more difficulties in accessing healthcare. This can be due to a number of reasons, from poor infrastructure to big distances between their places of residence and a closest healthcare provider. Thus, individuals in more rural areas usually wait longer until they seek medical help, which may make their conditions more severe and their treatment needs to be more intensive (13). Retaining nurses in rural areas is also difficult. When analyzing nurse migration in Korea, Cho et al. determined that newly graduated nurses employed in nonmetropolitan areas were less satisfied with their jobs than nurses working in metropolitan areas (17).

For the nurses to be able to help people successfully, proper education is necessary. However, education is far from being available to everyone who would want to pursue a career in nursing. In some countries, possible students are discouraged with weak regulations in education standards (Sub-Saharan Africa) (1), while in others, such as the U.S., the rising cost of medical education (at a rate unsurpassed in history) can dissuade possible nurses (13). Also, not all countries have legislation in order to protect a “nurse” education level, and academic levels vary between countries (1). The nurses leaving universities are also underprepared for major health crises, such as the most recent COVID-19 one, as “there is little attention paid during basic nursing education to emergency response, and faculty members report feeling poorly prepared to teach students about this topic” (18).

Policy solutions

To be able to combat global health challenges, it is important to emphasize how big of a role nurses play. WHO has declared the year 2020 as the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife, which shows commitment from a large number of countries to acknowledge the contributions of nurses and midwives to the wellbeing of people all around the world (19). Apart from this, the WHO is also involved in strategies and initiatives to improve the nursing situation, such as Nursing Now campaign, which is working to raise the profile and status of nurses worldwide (20). Also, in *State of the world's nursing 2020* report, the WHO provides policy options for an agenda to strengthen the nursing workforce “to deliver Sustainable Development goals, improve health for all, and strengthen the primary health care workforce on our journey towards universal health coverage” (21).

To continue and build upon the efforts concerned with addressing global nursing challenges mentioned above, one of the possible ways to lessen shortage of nurses (although not a straightforward one), is to show the commitment and compassion which goes into nursing and to acknowledge their hard and selfless work, which will mean more people will appreciate what the nurses are doing for all of us. This can also increase the number of potential candidates for these jobs (19). There is a number of campaigns that are already working on raising the profile and status of nurses worldwide, such as the WHO sponsored Nursing Now campaign (20). These campaigns should receive both vocal and monetary support from leaders all over the world, as nurses need to have a voice in policy development to speed up changes (1). Other ways to diminish nursing shortages include the rise in salaries and employment support programs for older nurses, as nursing is not enticing from a financial perspective, even in countries that could possibly afford it (middle-income countries), due to insufficient funding of the health sector (16).

This stronger inclusivity will be able to produce nurse leaders which will be prepared to develop and implement concrete policies (22) to improve their standing, and in effect, improve global health, as nurses are the usually closest to the situation on the ground, while having unique insight, which allows them to pinpoint the most pressing issues. On the same note, creating (and strengthening existing) nursing academic structures can help expand their involvement in global health policy development and promote partnership with policymakers (23).

When improving nursing educational prospects as relating to global health, there is a number of areas which the global community can help improve. As the world is changing really quickly, the nursing curricula should also adapt and evolve accordingly. It is important to integrate global health concepts into nursing curricula, as has been happening to some degree in the United States (2,23). Thanks to this, nursing students would be able to respect different cultures, determine proper behavior, recognize cultural particularities, and will be able to practice culturally conscious healthcare (24). Integrating global health concepts into nursing curricula can be achieved with the help of technology. Notable approaches include electronic globe (Global Health Watch Map), on which students can navigate and learn about various topics connected to health in other countries, or the Global Media Network (GMN), which uses digital videoconferences to connect students with other GMN partners across the globe, allowing students to interact with people belonging to different cultures (3). Though there are also challenges connected to implementing global health into nursing curricula, as the particular curriculum can be already full, the faculty can lack the will to implement it, or there can be a lack of funding to support these improvements or international travel (3).

Another, more hands-on approach, relating more to nursing practice, should allow both graduate and undergraduate citizens to experience health care in other countries and environments, thus creating “global citizens” (24). Nonetheless, ethical principles and guidelines which nurses need to consider when working in global settings and varying environments need to be implemented to this global nursing practice (25). Also, when sending students abroad, the safety of the students needs to be guaranteed, mostly when studying in countries with higher crime rates, or countries with increased health risks (such as countries with a high prevalence of malaria) (24). With these challenges tackled, however, the global health workforce will be much more equipped to work in a variety of environments. Apart from all this, with the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, there is also a pressing need to improve nursing programs in such a way that new nurses will be more equipped and prepared for highly stressful and demanding events. These improvements include preparing nurses for interdisciplinary cooperation or training the necessary competencies connected to digitalization and e-health (5).

Conclusion

The medical workers, with which people seeking help interact first, are usually nurses. As such, they are an essential asset to any working health care system, though their work is often underrated, and all their contributions have not been valued enough. With the world, which is nowadays more globalized than ever before, health concerns, which would impact only nations or regions, have now taken on global proportions. The epitome of such a crisis is the newest COVID-19 pandemic, which put a huge strain on all health systems around the globe. Even when COVID-19 is successfully tackled, other challenges (climate change, human trafficking, maternal health) will not disappear, and this viral infection is not expected to be the only one in years to come. To have at least a little chance in combating such formidable foes, we need to provide the best healthcare possible for all people around the world, as the effect of poor healthcare can affect other countries as well. Nurses can contribute a whole lot in this aspect, though the challenges that the global nursing workforce faces have to be addressed as well.

This work argued that combating nursing shortages or inadequacies in education can subsequently improve not only conditions of nurses, but also the overall global health. The possible policy solutions include raising salaries, providing social securities, or implementing employment support programs. To improve education and create more global citizens, global health concepts should be included in nursing curricula, and nursing students should have more possibilities to experience healthcare in other countries. Also, boosting the status of the nursing profession and giving nurses more possibilities to voice their ideas to shape policy can give policymakers unique insight into the situation on the ground, and help by enticing more people to take up such an important job. Subsequent research can analyze which issues nurses themselves consider as the most important ones, to help in setting policy priorities.

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Adherence to ethical standards

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