

Keeping our Profession 'Professional'

BY GENEVIÈVE M. CLAVREUL, RN, PH.D.

SEVERAL NURSES HAD GATHERED in the corridor of their unit and were carrying on an animated discussion. What could have initiated such a fierce discussion? Could it be a patient care issue or union talk (contract negotiations were eminent)? Nope. What had so invigorated the nurses was a discussion of their break time. They were so engrossed, they were unaware that their hallway discussion was being heard by everyone around them: fellow nurses, visitors, and patients.

Were these nurses aware that their behavior was unprofessional? Unlikely, otherwise they would have chosen to hold

this type of conversation behind the closed doors of the nurse's lounge, rather than in a public hallway.

Over the years, while working in nursing capacities ranging from bedside to DON, I have seen nurses behave with utmost professionalism under the most challenging of circumstances. They showed true grace under pressure.

I have also seen the contrary—nurses behaving in the most unprofessional manner, disgracing themselves and our profession. Many of us old-timers bemoan what appears to be a growing lack of professionalism in nursing. Some point to the abandonment of the traditional white

When the nursing team is comprised of members who are strong and motivated, unprofessional behavior is an exception, rather than the **norm of the unit.**

uniform as the start of this disintegration, others see the unionization of nursing as the cause, and still others blame the "Me Generation," pointing out that this younger group has little appreciation of societal norms and manners.

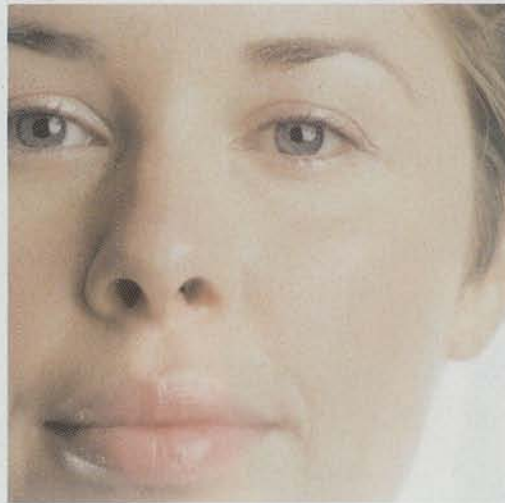
So what is the state of professionalism in nursing today? I believe that in many hospitals, professionalism is in serious trouble. Where there is a lack of professionalism, you will often find nurse dissatisfaction, burnout, and turnover. There are occasions when I think good and caring nurses often feel as though professionalism is out of style, and I would respond that like chivalry, professionalism is not dead—yet.

As with any good discussion, we should always start with a common point, and in this case it would be: "what does professionalism mean?" For the purpose of this article, I choose the following definition from Merriam-Webster:

1 a: of, relating to, or characteristic of a profession b: engaged in one of the learned professions c (1): characterized by or conforming to the technical or ethical standards of a profession (2): exhibiting a courteous, conscientious, and generally businesslike manner in the workplace.

This lack of professionalism usually starts small: the nurse who arrives late, then leaves early to pick up the kids. The nurse who leaves her duty station a mess because the new admission came in just minutes before the end of the shift. The nurse who sleeps or eats at the bedside, who arrives unkempt to work, gossips in public areas, and carries on a conversation in a language not understood by all present. We see it in the continuous battle for supremacy between the diploma/A.D.N. prepared nurse versus the B.S.N. prepared nurse, and the attendant jockeying to be recognized as the only "real" nurse.

These are trends that, if overlooked by management, can quickly spread to other members of the nursing team. Where the nursing team is working under continuous stress, is constantly short-staffed, lacks strong internal (head/charge nurse), or external (Director of Nursing /Chief Nursing Officer) leadership—then unprofessional behavior can take over the unit. When we begin to accept mediocre nursing behavior, care, and practices, we lay the groundwork for even greater acts of substandard behavior that will exhibited, not by a few, but by many.



The culture does play a role. When the nursing team is comprised of members who are strong and motivated, unprofessional behavior is an exception, rather than the norm of the unit. Nursing does not ask us to be perfect (except within our practice), but it does demand that we behave as role models, not only to other nurses, but to the public that holds us in such high esteem.

Consistent lack of professional behavior can and does drive good nurses away from the profession, leaving the "bad" and mediocre nurses behind. We all know that individuals rise or sink, as the case may be, to the occasion. Where professionalism is

stressed and expected, nurses, even the mediocre ones, strive to excel because such excellence is rewarded and recognized.

Yet, where there is little expectation of excellence, then the mediocre "I don't give a darn" nurse will find safe haven and thrive. As with parenting, keeping expectations high takes work and effort, and as with parenting, many don't put the energy forth. It is so much easier for a manager to just shrug her shoulders and say, "well what can I do?—there is a nursing shortage after all and I need the body?"

When I was head nurse or DON, I never had to fire anyone (place individuals on suspension, yes, but I'll save that topic for a different article). There were two reasons why I never had to let anyone go. First, I kept excellent documentation (I see another article in this), and, second, I always modeled and expected the highest. Nurses who were just in it for the paycheck, or, "putting in their time," either rose to the occasion and began exhibiting the new behavior or quietly left for other pastures. In the short run, this process cost the loss of some nurses. On the other hand, we created a culture of excellent and high standards, which attracted those kind of nurses. It didn't take long for the capable nurses to "advertise" the new professional atmosphere at work, and I often made up the loss of a few nurses with a waiting list of true professionals who wanted to join a strong and motivated team.

Is professionalism dead? Only if we allow it to be. **WN**



Geneviève M. Clavreul is a health care management consultant. She is an RN and has experience as a director of nursing and as a teacher of nursing management. She can be reached at: Solutions Outside the Box; PO Box 867, Pasadena, CA; 91102-867.gmc@solutionsoutsidethebox.net (626) 844-7812.