Mobilizing human resources to highlight the nursing value*

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2020 was designated as the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife by WHO. This campaign was launched in recognition of the contribution of nurses and midwives to global health and the celebration of the Bicentenary of Florence Nightingale. Further, 2021 has been designated as the International Year of Health and Care Workers (YHCW) in appreciation for their unwavering dedication in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020, humanity suffered the most widespread global pandemic of the century. The International Year of the Nurse and Midwife celebrations were overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which thrust the health professions into the spotlight in unexpected ways.

Nurses across the world fought the pandemic with incredible strength and determination and cared for patients through the worst of times. The outstanding contributions of nurses worldwide in the battle against the pandemic are the best interpretation of the spirit of Florence Nightingale.

Through painstaking efforts and tremendous sacrifices, China has successfully contained the spread of COVID-19, with a daily increase of locally confirmed cases now at single digits or zero. Nurses played an essential role in the battle with COVID-19. With strong government support, our nursing workforce has been increasing steadily in recent years, and our professional skills have also been developed significantly. Therefore, Chinese nurses can respond quickly and effectively in this emergency.

Over the past decade, the number of nurses in China has increased by 20,000 every year. By the end of 2020, registered nurses nationwide have exceeded 4.7 million, with more than 70% having a college degree or higher. Chinese nurses are well-trained and qualified. Nurses work closely with other healthcare workers in ICU, quarantine units, and Fangcang shelter hospitals. Nurses operate complicated life support machines, monitor vital signs, implement infection control, and play an essential role in reducing mortality and improving the cure rate. Our nurses fought on the front line of the pandemic while withstanding extreme physical and psychological pressure. They have made great sacrifices, and some even lost their lives. Their commitment and professionalism have earned respect and praise from around the world.

Now, global health systems continue to face severe challenges from outbreak waves of COVID-19, with new variants of the coronavirus keep appearing. We fully understand and share the feelings of people worldwide who are still under serious threat from the pandemic and express our respect to nursing colleagues fighting against COVID-19 on the frontlines, for that we have gone through the toughest times.

According to the WHO weekly briefing, as of 5 December 2021, nearly 265 million confirmed cases and over 5.2 million deaths have been reported globally. New confirmed cases and deaths have been rising in the last two months, and the situation is uncertain. We should summarize both the positive and negative experiences and work together to meet the challenges.

The experience from 2020 has proven that an adequate nursing workforce is a critical factor in fighting the pandemic. China is committed to maintaining a steady nursing workforce, even at the most emergency time. The contribution of Chinese nurses in battling the COVID-19 is highlighted and recognized by the government and the public. Heroic stories have inspired more young people to apply for nursing schools.

China has done great work in the last 18 months to mobilize nursing resources. At the beginning of the pandemic, confirmed cases of COVID-19 surged in Wuhan while facing a severe shortage of medical resources. The government urgently mobilized healthcare professionals and personal protective equipment (PPE) from all over the country to assist Hubei Province. Thousands of healthcare professionals volunteered to go to Hubei Province during the Chinese New Year holidays of 2020. Three hundred forty-six national medical teams, involving more than 40,000 healthcare professionals, went to the front line. Among them, 28,600 were nurses, accounting for nearly 70% of the medical team members. The reinforcement operation effectively relieved the pressures and the nursing shortages in Hubei with “zero infection.”

To motivate frontline nurses and stabilize the nursing workforce, the government has carried out a series of initiatives. For example, during the period of PPE shortages, China allocated PPE from all over the country and mobilized enterprises across the country to increase production capacity to the full extent, prioritizing the needs of frontline medical workers to ensure their safety.

* This article is based on the presentation at ICN Congress 2021.
China also ensured that healthcare professionals have priority in COVID-19 vaccination. Initiatives also include proper rotation of nurses to avoid overwork and burnout, prompt job transfer, or arranging paid leave for their rejuvenation. Mental health services are available for healthcare professionals on the frontline to relieve their pressure. The government also offers support to families of frontline nurses in need of assistance.

National honors were awarded to outstanding nurses by the government and health authorities, especially by our national leaders President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang. They recognized and praised nurses’ contributions at many important conferences. President Xi expressed his congratulations and praises to nurses of the whole country on the International Nurses Day, 2020. Premier Li visited the medical teams on the frontline in Wuhan during the most challenging period of the pandemic and inspired the healthcare workers. Many nurses won national awards due to their outstanding performance. I also went to Wuhan as the team leader of Peking Union Medical Hospital’s medical team in 2020. One of our young team members told me, “I am proud of volunteering to aid Hubei during the most emergency time. That is my responsibility and commitment.”

News media explored and widely publicized many touching stories of nurses on the frontline. Thousands of citizens in Wuhan lined the streets to cheer, applaud, and thank doctors and nurses for their incredible dedication to fighting coronavirus and saving peoples’ lives when medical teams left Wuhan after the pandemic was contained. National medical teams received water salutes at airports when they left Wuhan or returned to the cities they worked. The public gives our medical heroes the highest courtesy and respect.

The Chinese Nursing Association (CNA) has always been standing firmly with our nurses at the most challenging times. We organized experts to summarize experiences and published a series of guidelines for the care of COVID-19 patients. We have actively applied for financial support from the government, providing more training opportunities for nurses and enhancing their professional skills. We have set up student service organizations to closely connect with students in the hope of enabling more student nurses to become a part of the future nursing workforce.

According to the WHO’s State of the World’s Nursing 2020 report, “nursing is the largest occupational group in the health sector, accounting for approximately 59% of global health professionals.” The potential of nursing has not been unleashed. The CNA has always been an active promoter of the Global Community of Health for All. We are willing to share information and provide assistance to national nursing associations (NNAs) across the world to fight the pandemic.

I would like to put forth several proposals. First, we call for governments to increase investment in healthcare, continuously expand nursing services, enrich nursing content, and create more attractive nursing jobs to improve the nursing workforce. Second, we need to actively build a training system for nurses in accordance with health demands, especially in primary healthcare, chronic disease management, and elderly care. Third, we advocate increasing investment in nursing education and providing more opportunities for nurses to develop and improve their skills. Fourth, we advocate creating a safe working environment for nursing practice and enhancing regulations to strengthen nurses’ rights. Fifth, NNAs should strengthen coordination and support the ICN to play a more significant role in the global health community.

Viruses and pandemics do not respect borders. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated once again that humanity is a whole and shares a common destiny. We cannot defeat this pandemic one country at a time. We can only achieve victory with a coordinated global effort based on the principles of solidarity, equity and sharing. Let us join hands together to create a better future for the global healthcare system.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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