

PROFESSION OR UNION: WHO WILL CALL THE SHOTS?

JOAN M. GILCHRIST

*Assistant Professor, School for Graduate Nurses
McGill University*

TODAY some of the most crucial problems concerning the character of nursing practice are being solved by unions, by hospital associations and by government. Professional or otherwise, unions conceive the answers to these problems to be amenable to inflexible, rigid and isolated statements of what "each side" in negotiations with employers will or will not do under certain similarly inflexible, rigid and isolated circumstances. The same type of solution is often sought by professional associations attempting to give people definite predetermined "guidelines" upon which the solution to professional problems in work situations are to be based. What are the logical consequences of this for nursing?

Neither union nor professional association individually or in concert, as each is presently constituted, appear to be capable of reversing the insidious erosion of the individual and collective nurse's power in her job relationships, a crucial requirement of a professional service. Who then is to call the shots? This paper presents some aspects of the situation to be considered in deliberations among nurses as they answer this question.

In their individual and group relationships with employers, nurses are attempting to find methods of negotiation and bargaining which allow them to retain their professional aspirations, fulfill their perceived obligations, and acquire social and economic security. A variety of arrangements have been utilized, but to date these have required that a false and, in my view, a dangerous dichotomy exist between general staff nurses on the one hand and management nurses on the other. This is true even when the bargaining function is under the

aegis of, or a separate arm of, the professional nursing association. Since such an organization represents all members of the profession and purports to have an intimate concern with all things which affect nursing participation in health services, the tacit acceptance of this dichotomy is an inherent contradiction. But an even more serious conceptual error is made when responsibility for remuneration and those things called working conditions are conceived to be a function of any organization other than the professional association. For it is inconceivable that these can be artificially separated from "professional" matters and remain an important part of the professional ethos.

Unions operating under antiquated labor codes developed for non-professional workers see no need to challenge laws which require these separations. Professional associations are of similar bent and are not sufficiently strong to exert pressures in those places which are the seats of law-making and change. In either case the general philosophy, the framework within which contracts are negotiated, and the specific items negotiated are those of a typical union.

The concept of collective bargaining in nursing is now relatively well established and it is time to review the entire situation and the context within which it exists with a view to determining future action, including the new structural arrangements which will ensure the delivery of a high quality of nursing care in the amount required. Decisions of this sort are often taken in conformity with the perceived power structure and with vested interests rather than according to what will best serve the evolving purposes of the professional organization.

In selecting among alternative courses of action, I see two main aspects of the problem which we have before us. One is the appraisal of our profession within the context of society and the other is an assessment of the ramifications of the union movement.

Let us look first at the trade union. Management and unions come to grips in two arenas, the corporation and society at large. Management, as a functional group, exercises little social initiative—the desire is to stand pat. The corporation is operating in an ideological framework which it and its predecessors largely created. Its creativeness, self-esteem, daring and drive are largely concerned and consumed in the business arena, not the societal one. This complacency with the social framework may likewise be imputed to the unions. Their objectives are quite compatible with the present system—higher minimum wage, shorter working hours, better overtime pay, improved social security and so on. In short, there are no revolutionary or radical designs. Unionism betrays no sense of direction and is

content to drift. Its challenge to management control is more apparent than real. It has voluntarily integrated itself within its society. This spares the country from divisive political contests but at the same time scarcely leads to change. Moreover, Chamberlain says,

Most labor economists who have undertaken research to establish whether unions have been able to provide differential rewards for their members over the employees of unorganized establishments have concluded either in the negative or in a very much qualified affirmative.¹

Further he suggests: "The notion that union power is so monolithic that it sweeps all before it is more supportable by prejudice than by impartial analysis".²

What then have unions done if most wage increases are the result of changing economic conditions alone? They have influenced the forms of remuneration; i.e. various fringe benefits. This matters little to management. There is virtually no dispute, however, that the unions' representation of members in the grievance process provides a major benefit. The effectiveness of union power seems largely confined to its success in securing equitable treatment for its individual members. Then why all the union-management conflict? In the area of wage determination and in grievance handling, the union is looked on as insurance. Economists in general have maintained that the union's non-economic contribution is by far its most important function. Yet is it also true that perhaps the union can remain as a viable organization performing day-to-day protective functions only because members believe it also provides them some insurance against unfair wage decisions? There is a growing conviction that union power has had a remarkably minor effect so that the union's exercises have been largely uneconomic and perhaps somewhat unsocial. Economists are convinced that unions will be driven into other sorts of activity, such as political activity, where they can have a more potent influence than at the bargaining table, through promoting legislation dealing with employment measures, public expenditure, and a number of forms of social change. Most of to-day's labor leaders, on such a stage, would feel exposed and uncomfortable. Surely it is in such an arena that an organized profession will select its coalitions and engage its opponents.

We are witnessing in North American society simultaneous and grandiose expansion plans of all traditional professions, a spectacular proliferation of new professions and the increasing professionalization of business life.³ Veblen's sixty year-old dream of a professionally run society has never been closer to realization. Sociologists and historians

have now made valuable studies of individual professions, but these have by and large lacked discussion of the organic relationship of each discipline to the community at large. As Whitehead has said, "each profession makes progress, but it is progress in its own groove . . . (serious thought is restrained) within a groove. The remainder of life is treated superficially with the imperfect categories of thought derived from one profession."⁴

It is clear that practitioners of a profession have not been interested in viewing their work in the light of an interplay of values from a variety of disciplines. Apart from an awareness of the tremendous manpower requirements that a developing technology and an exploding population have enforced upon the professions, and of the rocketing costs of professional services which have alarmed even the most affluent society, we all seem to be oblivious to the existence of a professional problem. Administrative demands increasingly divert professionals from their real work, while demands for their services are made not only by an ever expanding clientele, but by business and government, both of which have come to depend upon the advice of professional consultants. The closer the professional moves toward the center of societal life, the more functions he is called upon to perform. Lynn has noted:

Because the professionals have been no more willing than the general public to face up to the predicament in which their triumph has placed them, they . . . have guarded their exclusive rights of performance . . . For all their intellectual vitality and daring receptivity to new ideas, the American professions are enormously conservative when it comes to changing the club rules . . . Such conservatism is clearly irresponsible in the America of the 1960's . . . Our professional institutions are an important stabilizing factor in our volatile society, thereby helping to maintain world order. Yet, at the same time that they help to bridge the gulf between nations, the professions erect "No Trespassing" signs between themselves and other professional groups, especially the newer ones. And if they help to keep our society steady, they do not blaze new social pathways—at least not as often as they should . . . More than anything else, our professionals need to liberate themselves—Just as their colonial predecessors did—from monopolistic notions of who should do what job and narrow-minded conceptions of their obligations to the community at large.⁵

Professional associations evolve as a means to control standards and entry into the professions and to diffuse professional knowledge. Their original intent is to be democratic in character, with whatever implications or assumptions this has for the people involved.

To know a professional is to know of his or her organized profession, associations or societies, for these, like the institutions in which

they work, determine much of the professional's behavior. There is clear evidence that such organizations make the professional a conformist and a conservative to a considerable extent. Some associations, and especially one like the American Medical Association, have gained steadily in political power. "They have become oligarchic rather than democratic in character"⁶ despite what "seems" to be and is verbalized as, true democratic process. In terms of recognized institutional and political power in society, nursing is one of the least powerful professions. In terms of its practice and development it has used the model of another profession, medicine, to an inordinate degree.

Most descriptions of the nursing role are of two types: narrow and technical or general and vague. These, combined with our lack of many characteristics constituting the "professional syndrome", will keep us in the shadow of other older professionals, dominated by them in regard to the nature of our contribution to society. We lack the right to make major policy decisions within our health institutions and have not challenged the prerogative assumed by others to define the nature of disease and health and to determine how health and nursing services ought to be distributed and paid for. Moreover, if our development as an organized profession continues to follow that of most other professions, then our vested interests, our institutional inheritance, and our oligarchic processes will preclude a participation in society which would "blaze the new social pathways" needed for today and tomorrow.

As one of the "new professions" if not new occupations, we have an opportunity to avoid these mistakes. To accomplish this we must be prepared to view our work and our role, not only in substantive terms through the esoteric nature of the service which we deliver to individuals, organizations or government, but also with an awareness of our place in the society, with knowledge of social forces which impinge on our services, and with a realistic interpretation of what we believe we must do and are able to do in the context of not only maintaining, but moving the social order forward. Our conception of our obligations to the community at large must develop through the identification and interpretation of broad horizons. We must be willing to investigate, initiate, and run counter to predetermined ideas of the "right" road to our objectives. We must unite to promote solidarity and gain through the power it provides a greater voice in the affairs of man, but we must not seek specific, personal, or conservative solutions to dynamic problems by viewing them within a narrow framework. We must find ways to alleviate the oligarchic tendencies

of our associations in action, something which other professions have not done.

As with other emerging professions, ours is one in which members are not homogeneous with respect to the amount of knowledge and community orientation they possess and, at the same time, the knowledge on which occupational performance is based is not highly developed. Thus our codes are but vague generalities and hard for the individual practitioner to apply in concrete situations. Our profession needs to increase its effectiveness in the functions of self-determination, self-control, and to re-determine the goals of socialization and education of the members. Involved in this is the association's right to assess and negotiate its working conditions, to assist in all ways in strengthening its professional schools, and to gain prestige and support from the general public who provide the pressures in response to which legislators act. While these concepts are familiar, accomplishment has escaped us. To do this well means the engagement in some conflict with elements both inside and outside of our occupational group. But in such social situations, competition and conflict often have positive as well as negative functions. We can no longer avoid such confrontations, and we must be much better prepared to engage in them than we have in the past.

In summary, these appear to be the crucial issues:

1. The focus of union activity, and the weight of union power, is likely to shift from the bargaining table to those things which affect the social order much more profoundly, but which, at the same time, will be protective of the integrity, prestige, and economic status of the occupational group. In short, to those things which we view as professional concerns. Should not *all* professional nurses have the right and indeed the obligation to determine the future of "Nursing in Society"?
2. Unions, in an economic sense alone, have dubious effects in the long run upon the earnings of the group they represent. Rather, this is more a function of the total economic situation in the community and the relative prestige and power of the occupational group.
3. The status of an individual accrues primarily from his occupation. Where the occupation is a profession, or viewed as such by society, the prestige, integrity, and social power of the profession is a function of its solidarity and its strength in defining its own practice and in identifying the type, quantity, and scope of service as well as the structure through which the

service will reach the public. Ultimately, the power of a profession may be viewed in relation to its ability in defining social change.

4. Public acceptance of expert advice and care is based upon the image it has of the profession. The public image of even an emergent profession is far different from that of a union under whatever guise the latter seeks to function in meeting perceived challenges. Simplified, this means that a union is perceived as self-interested while a profession is seen to be inherently service-oriented.
5. In emerging professions members are not homogeneous with respect to knowledge, social orientation, and capability of changing basic tenets. Statements of intent to the public and to themselves are only vague generalities. These must be made more meaningful to both the practitioners and the public.
6. The profession must reassess its place in the social order. It must seek new and perhaps unconventional answers to problems which are both ancient and contemporary. In this, it must seek to present viable alternatives before the membership, and before the public. We must climb out from under the oppressive blanket held firm by other more powerful professions.

In my view, evolving a structure which promotes the integrity of, and thereby strengthens, the professional association while at the same time promoting a viable means of meeting the economic, social, and professional needs of nurses, is necessary if nurses are to take their place in society as a profession. Any arrangement which attempts to solve only the readily perceived problems commonly associated with the term "collective bargaining" is no longer tenable. The interactions among parts of the social order will not permit real success within such a narrow framework, be it union or professional association.

FOOTNOTES

1. Neil W. Chamberlain. "The Corporation and the Trade Union," in Edward A. Mason (ed.), *The Corporation in Modern Society*. New York: Atheneum, 1966, p. 132.

2. Ibid, p. 133.

3. Neil W. Chamberlain. "One Life of the Mind in the Firm", *Daedalus*. Winter, 1969, pp. 134-146.

and Michel Crozier. "A New Rationale for American Business", *Daedalus*. Winter, 1969, pp. 147-158.

4. A. N. Whitehead. *Science and the Modern World*. Cambridge, 1925, pp. 275-276.

5. Kenneth S. Lynn. *The Professions in America*. Beacon Press, Boston: 1963, pp. 12-13.

6. James Howard Means. "Homo Medicus Americanus," in Lynn. op. cit. p. 51.