

ACCOUNTABILITY IN NURSING EDUCATION

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In nursing education, and in nursing in general, we frequently hear the words "responsibility" and "accountability" used together in the same sentence. In developing this paper for presentation it was necessary to untangle the two and place the primary emphasis upon only one — accountability. The topic leads to a series of questions: What is it to be accountable? To whom are nursing education programmes accountable? For what are they accountable? And by whose or what expectations?

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ACCOUNTABILITY?

Definitions provided by commonly used dictionaries define accountable as "liable to be called to account, or to answer for responsibilities and conduct; answerable, responsible. Chiefly of persons — to a person, for a thing." (Oxford, 1933). Both of the Oxford (1933) and Webster (1966) dictionaries list "responsible" as one of the synonyms of "accountable". Webster's (1966) distinguishes "accountable" from its synonyms "responsible" and "answerable" as follows:

Responsible may differ from answerable and accountable in centering attention on a formal organizational role, function, duty, or trust.

Answerable is more likely to be used in situations involving moral or legal obligations or duty under judgement.

Accountable may be used in situations involving imminence of retribution for unfulfilled trust or violated obligations. (p. 1935).

TO WHOM ARE WE ACCOUNTABLE?

The above definitions mention the words "trust" and "obligation" and modify them with the words "unfulfilled" or "violated", suggesting the consequence of retribution. From whom or what do we, as university schools, receive such a trust or obligation?

In the writer's view there are only two groups which place such a trust or obligation in the charge of university schools of nursing. They are as follows:

Society or "The Public"

Because we are part of publicly-funded institutions, we carry a public trust and therefore are publicly accountable, generally through our univer-

sities, which provide us with sanctuary and shelter. That trust concerns the responsibility which we share with our parent universities for the transmission and pursuit of knowledge, in the public service, in a way which uses public resources wisely.

The Profession of Nursing

Very briefly our profession gives us a mandate and invests in us its trust to prepare those who will be not only the professional nurses of tomorrow but also the leaders of nursing for the next decades.

Both society and the profession have concern with the standards which we set for ourselves or must meet. However, before discussing standards, it will be useful to consider those groups to whom we are not accountable.

TO WHOM ARE WE NOT ACCOUNTABLE?

We are not accountable to our students but we are responsible because of our roles and functions for providing them with the opportunities to develop the skills and abilities to practice competently as professional nurses, skills and abilities which will provide them with a reasonable expectation of employment. Should we not fulfill our responsibilities to them, in their view, then they may ask our universities to determine if we have been fair and used principles of due process in dealing with them, or they may appeal to the public sector, to the courts. That is, they may ask for a public examination as to whether we have been accountable or whether we have violated the public trust vested in us.

Similarly, we are not accountable to nor for each other, with the exception of the relationship of Deans/Directors to faculty members. As faculty members, we have a responsibility to ensure that each of us is considered fairly in relation to our share of the university's responsibilities to transmit and pursue knowledge in the public service, and in a way which uses public resources wisely. If an individual considers that judgements expressed by colleagues and/or the Dean/Director have been unfair, or due process has been denied, then appeal mechanisms are used within the university, through the Faculty Association or, finally, to the courts.

We therefore have one additional accountability, in the public sense, and that is to be just in our dealing with each other and with students.

We are also not accountable to the future employers of our graduates although we do have a responsibility to them, that is, to be clear in describing the abilities of our graduates so that they may decide whether or not to employ them. If they feel that we are not fulfilling either our public or our professional trusts or obligations, they may complain to either/both the public sector, often government rather than the courts because of our manpower function, and/or to the organization which represents the professional interest.

An example of this is the reaction of hospital associations to changes in diploma-level education, specifically to the transfer of programmes to community colleges and the establishment of two-year programmes — a “reaction-response” phenomenon which still occurs.

The relationship between Deans/Directors and faculty members is mentioned above as differing from the interdependent nature of the responsibilities of faculty members for each other in the fulfillment of their duties.

Deans/Directors are accountable for their stewardship of their Schools to the senior administrative officers through to the University President and the Board of Governors *for* their administration of the academic units and *for* the quality of the academic programmes to the Senate. For programmes operated within the School, faculty members are accountable to the Dean/Director for the way in which they fulfill their agreed upon responsibilities. Deans/Directors also serve as the representatives and spokespersons of their Schools, internally and externally. Faculty members usually have an opportunity to provide formal assessment of a Dean/Director’s stewardship and leadership at the time when the appointment is under review; that review is to assess the degree to which the Dean/Director has been accountable, according to the public and professional trusts or obligations.

The final question raised at the beginning of the paper is:

ACCOUNTABLE — BY WHOSE/WHAT EXPECTATIONS?

Practitioners share the public trust of the educators because nursing is a self-regulating profession. In most Canadian provinces, self-regulation includes the responsibility to set educational standards for entry to the profession.

This social mandate, transmitted to the Schools via the professional body, concerns the expectation that safe practitioners of nursing will be prepared who meet certain practice standards which are assumed to have been gained through approved educational programmes.

Since these “safe practice standards” are ones set for all programmes preparing nurses for registration, they should not be difficult for universities to meet. The safety to practice standard, used broadly, is probably the one held by the general public, who are the recipients of care by nurses, and also the one held by members of our associate health professions. Because we are part of the university system, society has an expectation, not always well-defined, that we will not only prepare safe practitioners but that our graduates also are the recipients of certain social values and a cultural heritage whose transmission is part of the University’s accountability. Furthermore, we share the University’s responsibilities to pursue knowledge, and to use public resources wisely. In many

of our provinces, the phrase “to use public resources wisely” is translated into “to get along on less” and, in some cases, to do more with overall increases which are less than the costs of inflation. Within our provinces, universities have joined together to try “to get along on less” collectively. When university income is tied to student enrolment and when overall enrolment begins to decline, a further shrinking in income occurs.

The smaller student to teacher ratios in university schools of nursing makes them subject to critical appraisal by members of other faculties, perhaps even subject to envy, particularly when the other faculties see themselves as losing influence in the university to the professional schools. As well, they see the climate of restraint as discouraging graduate students which therefore reduces their own manpower for teaching and research, along with their manpower training function.

It is therefore crucial that university schools of nursing demonstrate both externally and internally that their programmes not only are strong but also are performing a necessary social function. The demonstration of strength must include research in the laboratory of our discipline and subsequent publication. While we have frequently argued the importance of research for the advancement of nursing knowledge, we must now argue it, as well, for our future in the university — we are very much in a “publish or perish” era.

As I noted earlier, our profession gives us a mandate and invests in us its trust to prepare those who will not only be the professional nurses of tomorrow but also the leaders of nursing for the next decade. This accountability goes beyond the mandate to prepare safe practitioners for we are the university schools. It is an accountability which involves an interdependence between the profession and the schools. The profession needs our critical knowledge of what a university school ought to be and to do; we need the profession because of its reality-orientation and its wisdom — we both need each other’s idealism.

It is for this reason, and because of the importance of a mechanism for external verification of our worth and support for our principles, that we must jointly proceed with the development of an accreditation programme which will represent our collective expectation that we and our programmes will exhibit certain characteristics. These are the characteristics of accountability, relevance, relatedness and uniqueness, all of which have been defined by the C.A.U.S.N. Accreditation Committee (C.A.U.S.N., 1979). Accompanying these, and in some cases part of them, are the expectations which we hold for ourselves in common with our university colleagues. These are:

1. That we will engage in scholarship, including research to extend the boundaries of our knowledge.

2. That we will remain competent in the practice of our discipline, that is in the human laboratory of our discipline.
3. That we will assume our share of responsibility for university governance and for its public service role.

These are all measures of the extent to which we fulfill the public and professional trust and obligation which rests upon us. This discussion of accountability uses some very traditional and value-laden words, such as trust, obligation and duty, which are much older than some of the new words we frequently hear such as "conceptual framework" and "independent practitioner". The writer suggests that these words are ones which are very fundamental to our understanding of a very basic concept, that is *accountability*.

REFERENCES

- Canadian Association of University Schools of Nursing. *Development of a method to promote growth and change in university schools of nursing and in nursing in general*. Ottawa: The Association, 1979 (mimeographed).
- Allen, Moyra. *Evaluation of Educational Programmes in Nursing*. Geneva: World Health Organization, 1977.

RESUME

Enseignement des sciences infirmières et responsabilité

L'auteur se penche sur le concept de la responsabilité en soins infirmiers et pose les questions suivantes: Qu'est-ce qu'être responsable? Devant qui les personnes chargées d'élaborer et de faire appliquer les programmes de sciences infirmières sont-elles responsables? De quoi sont-elles responsables? Et selon quelles attentes de qui? On conclut que la responsabilité dépasse le mandat des écoles qui sont chargées de la formation de praticiens compétents et s'étend conjointement au corps infirmier et aux écoles. Le corps infirmier a besoin des connaissances critiques des écoles en milieu universitaire; parallèlement, les enseignants doivent compter sur le corps infirmier, pour les aider à axer leurs programmes sur la réalité. L'auteur signale la nécessité d'un programme d'accréditation (tel que défini par le comité d'accréditation de l'ACEUR, 1979) qui tende vers l'excellence, la recherche, la compétence dans l'exercice de la discipline dans le laboratoire humain, le partage des responsabilités pour la direction des programmes universitaires et pour son rôle de service public.