

Nurses' campaigns have won hearts and changed laws

Creating change in public institutions and regulations can often seem like a long uphill climb. But nurses have been among the most effective people anywhere in getting that change and helping to create a safer, healthier workplace and community.

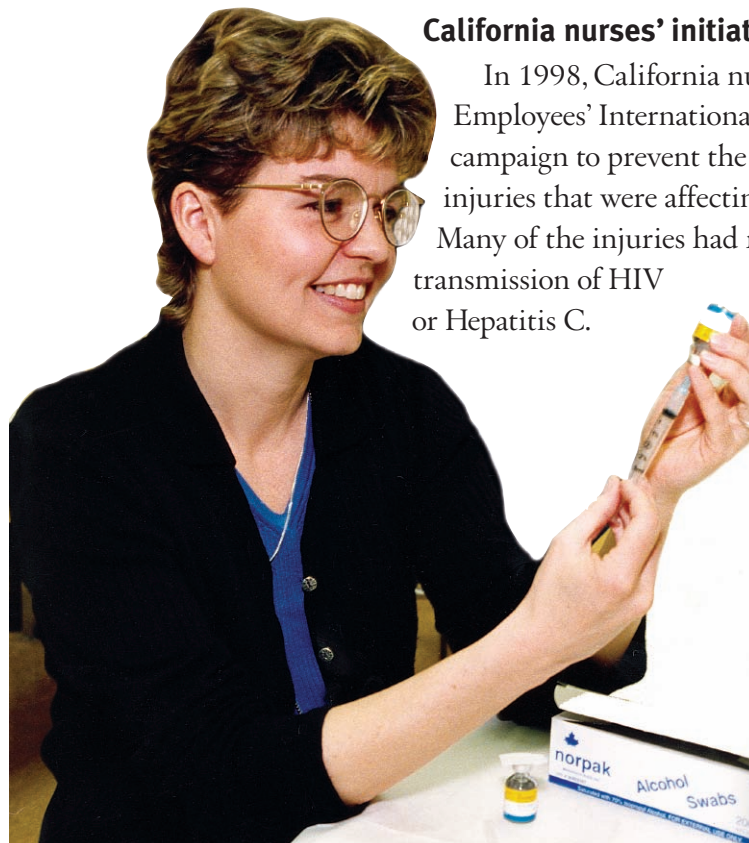
Nurses in B.C. and across the continent can look with pride at the accomplishments over the last few years, which have been the result of nurses' effective campaigning, a passionate commitment to their profession and the high level of trust and credibility that nurses have with the public.

A key focus of nurses' training and work is prevention — prevention of disease, prevention of injury, prevention of exposure to toxic substances. When nurses put their voices together in a prevention initiative, people listen. So do governments.

California nurses' initiative

In 1998, California nurses and the Service Employees' International Union (SEIU) led a campaign to prevent the thousands of needlestick injuries that were affecting health care workers. Many of the injuries had resulted in the transmission of HIV or Hepatitis C.

A campaign that was launched by with California nurses and eventually branched out across the U.S. has been successful in winning legislation that protects health care workers from needlestick injuries. Some 24 states, as well as the federal health and safety administration now have regulations.



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New regulations won

The campaign culminated in a whirlwind fax campaign to the governor's office organized by the Nurses Alliance in support of the proposed amendments to the California Occupational Health and Safety Act. It turned the tide — despite opposition from the California Health Care Association, the governor signed the bill.

The amendments were finalized a year later in the form of new blood borne pathogens regulations that require California health care facilities to use needles designed to prevent needlestick injuries, including needleless system. It also requires them to maintain a log of needlestick and sharps injuries.

The American Nurses Association also mounted a Safe Needles Save Lives campaign to demand similar legislation from state and federal legislators. Thousands of nurses across the U.S. took part. In 2000, the U.S. federal government passed amendments to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Act requiring federal health care facilities to include safer devices and needleless systems as part of injury reduction program. Since then, some 24 U.S. states have implemented legislation — a testament to the tremendous campaign mounted by nurses for workplace and community prevention.

In Canada, only Manitoba has so far enacted needlestick legislation. But the B.C. Nurses' Union is working right now with other health care unions to get B.C. to adopt similar legislation. Like the U.S. campaign, which was inspired by RNs Lynda Arnold and Karen Daley who both contracted HIV from needlestick injuries, the B.C. campaign is spurred by BCNU member Julie Savard who contracted Hepatitis C through a needlestick injury in January 2005.

B.C. nurses' cytotoxics campaign

Another B.C. nurse, Sally Giles, was at the centre of an earlier BCNU campaign that led to the establishment of Workers' Compensation Board regulations governing the use of cytotoxic drugs. Those regulations today are among the best on the continent.

An emergency room nurse at Campbell River Hospital, Giles' duties involving mixing and administering the cytotoxic drugs used in various chemotherapy treatments. There was no training provided and no policies governing the use of the drugs. In 1991, Giles was diagnosed with cancer of the bile duct, undoubtedly the result of her exposure to the cytotoxic materials. She died only eight months later. To add insult to tragedy, the WCB denied her claim for benefits.

Her death galvanized a campaign by the BCNU to win protection for other nurses handling cytotoxic drugs. The union demanded changes to regulations and pressed for a coroner's inquest into Giles' death. When a coroner's inquiry was held, several nurses testified as to the unsafe conditions, adding their own experience to the testimony offered by world renowned experts brought in by the BCNU.

The campaign led directly to the establishment of Section 6.42 on Cytotoxic Drugs in the WCB Occupational Health and Safety Regulation. The new section addressed each of the concerns raised by nurses — another testimony to their effective work.

Nurses' advocacy led to changes

Many other changes in the workplace have come about as a result of nurses' action. In the early 1970s, Cheryl Dunlop, while still a nurse in training, warned her colleagues and instructors about the potential for excessive radiation exposure in radium treatment rooms. Because of her action, nurses were given radiation counters, similar to those used by x-ray technologists, that allowed them to keep exposures below minimums. Two decades later, Dunlop's research and advocacy as an operating room nurse led to the introduction of sealed suction containers, which eliminated nurses' exposure to blood-borne pathogens, including HIV.

At the heart of the new regulations that nurses won were the right to know what they were being exposed to and the right to participate in developing new protective regulations. Those regulations benefit patients as well as nurses.

Nurses' community initiatives

And it's not just in the workplace that nurses have been able to win protection legislation and regulations. In 1999, Vancouver General Hospital nurse Debra Bond raised questions about the use and disposal of mercury fever thermometers. She warned that the lack of hospital policies could result in toxic mercury entering the environment. As a result of her persistence, VGH has now eliminated the use of mercury thermometers and is phasing out other mercury devices as well.

In Ontario, nurses have been a prominent part of the successful campaigns to win pesticide bylaws, which restrict the use of cosmetic pesticides and help protect the environmental health of the community.

Leaders in creating change

There are still many areas where prevention initiatives are needed. Nurses have shown they can be leaders in moving them forward.

Urging health authorities to change the cleaning products they use, or getting PVC IV bags out of neonate nurseries may seem like a daunting task. But then the campaign for safe needles must have seemed overwhelming at first, especially since organizers faced opposition from healthcare operators and governments. Still they did it, working with others in the workplace and the community. They won over public opinion and they won new regulations that will reduce injuries and save nurses' and patients' lives.

With good organization, solid information and the same commitment, nurses in B.C. can be just as effective in dealing with the issues outlined in these papers.



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