

We are not HEROES, we are nurses (AND OUR MISSION IS TO TAKE CARE OF OUR PEOPLE WHEN THEY CANNOT TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES)

LETTER FROM A VETERAN NURSE IN THE WORLD HEALTH DAY, APRIL 7TH 2020

I am Begoña Seguí, I have been a nurse for over 23 years, of which I have worked for 19 years in different ICUs from Valencian hospitals. At the same time, I am a member of the MedicusMundi Spain Council for which I have developed several voluntary services in Mozambique with patients with HIV infection and tuberculosis.

This year 2020 has been declared by the WHO as the "International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife" as a way of recognition to this immense and quiet group that we are, working in the shadows like ants in an ant-hill with a sole goal: to take care of people when they cannot take care of themselves.

We are present 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. We may not catch the headlines for our activities, we do not get applauded after a successful innovative surgery or when an experimental treatment achieves its aimed targets. However, behind the medical staff, there is ALWAYS a nurse team working hard to improve health care. Without us, nurses, it would be impossible to achieve it.

Nevertheless, it does not seem a priority within countries' health policies to have a nurse workforce highly trained. Apart from the lack of human resources that affects the health profession worldwide, the lack of nursing staff is, probably, the most important. And there is no prospect of improvement. The report from the "Third Global Forum on Human Resources for Health" estimates that the deficit of nursing workforce in the world will reach 12.9 million by 2035.

This deficit of nursing workforce has lots of consequences. Nursing staff is the only contact always available, fighting against the lack of resources and training to cover the needs of people in many remote corners of the planet. Sometimes, we even find major difficulties to get paid for our work, and this leads to a massive migration from rural to urban areas, or from poorer to more wealthy countries, leaving behind those places where our work is more needed. To illustrate this, in Uganda there is a ratio of nursing workforce 40 times less than in the United States of America, a country that received African professionals to cover its necessities. But we can see these migrations also in Europe. Spain has 5.3 nursing people for every 1,000 inhabitants (the European average reaches 8.3). It is the sixth country with the fewest number of nurses in Europe and yet, female and male Spanish professionals had to migrate to other countries, mainly to

Germany or England due to the latest economic crisis. Care needs in the most developed countries is on the rise causing the demand for nursing workers to continue growing. But not enough personnel are being trained to cover this global demand which, as it always happens, causes the most impoverished countries and regions to be the most affected by this lack of personnel.

I will not extend myself further on this matter. I would have preferred to talk about how much we are valued in Europe for our excellent training and preparation, and how we are hired out of professionals from other countries (take as an example the huge number of Spanish nurses working in the NHS of the UK), or the average of ten years that elapse since graduation until getting a labor contract that gives stability, or how we are insulted when we do not give the answer that the patient wants, or the low salaries compared to those of other professions with less risk and better working conditions in terms of social and family conciliations.

But today, April, 7th I do not wish to talk about that, and not because it is not happening, but because we as nurses devote ourselves to our patients, and whenever they need us we leave our claims behind to devote ourselves to what is more important for us, that is the HEALTH and WELL-BEING of the patient.

Nobody could imagine a couple of months ago that we would face a health crisis situation like the one we are facing due to the Covid-19 and the worldwide pandemic it caused. Nursing professionals are used to working under pressure, but now this pressure is much higher. Not only the workload has increased, but also the level of infection, forcing us to isolate at home for at least two weeks, decreasing the already shortage of equipment.

But the nursing staff put up with it. During this crisis you will not hear nurses complaining about the amount of work, double shifts or reduced rest periods. For sure you will hear us claiming that we cannot do our work well due to the lack of means which is proved by the fact that we are the most infected group against the coronavirus, which is reducing our small army even more.

We are people with an autonomous and independent profession that above all seeks to ensure the health of the community through various levels of intervention. Primary Care, base and pillar of our health system, carries out tasks as necessary as the monitoring of chronic pathologies, health education or health promotion. In specialized care – what is known as hospital care- we are not only present in the inpatient units performing welfare work, but also in management areas such as bed allocation, or training in health education and nosocomial infection control. As you can see, the obsolete concept of the nurse as the assistant to the doctor is far away.

Some years ago I heard the word RESILIENCE for the first time. And that is what we have. We, as part of the world of *international cooperation* are familiar to the expression *resilient society*, or the ability of a given community to overcome traumatic situations (natural disasters, economic or health crises), very frequent in the countries where we, the WHO's, carry out our work. Well yes, we as female and male nurses are *resilient* because the more difficult it is for us, the more we grow. But this resilience ends up taking

its toll on us throughout our lives, and it makes us lose strength to defend our professional rights and make our profession visible.

These days we are applauded from balconies and are called HEROES. But we are not heroes but professionals with a wonderful profession who have managed to adapt to the times and who only want to continue working with excellence, as we like to do it. And we also want to be cared, not only by the society through its recognition but also by public administrations. Let's not allow the deficiencies fall on deaf ears after the crisis. We do not want to continue being a *resilient profession*.

Well yes, *this is our year*, and it seems to be a WHO's joke, but maybe that thanks to a bug called COVID-19, our profession be finally recognized as it happened 200 years ago, when Florence Nightingale set the basis of what later would be known as the modern infirmary during the Crimea War.