

Meet the President ■ Probing ONA's deal ■ Star's 1st Nightingale Award winner

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Caring through Chaos

Military nurses find rewards amid the ruins

Criminal charges rattle RNs

On Oct. 25, 2001, registered nurses across Ontario reacted with sadness and disbelief to the news that two nurses had been charged with criminal negligence in the death of a patient at The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. Since that day, the hospital has engaged in a number of activities to support the nurses who were charged, and to communicate with all nurses during this difficult time. Registered Nurse Journal asked Janet Rush, chief nursing officer at The Hospital for Sick Children, to talk about this experience and its impact on front-line nurses and the organization.

At every level of society there is an enormous reaction when an unexpected event such as the death of a child occurs, especially when that event occurs in a hospital setting. A coroner's inquest, with jury recommendations for follow-up action, may be called to address issues related to the death.

At The Hospital for Sick Children (HSC), a 2000 inquest into the death of 10-year-old patient determined that the child's death was a homicide, or death at the hands of another. While the jury decision carries no criminal weight and seldom translates directly into criminal charges, the mere mention of the word homicide was enough to send shock waves through the hospital. On October 25, the nursing community at the HSC and across Ontario reacted with shock, disbelief, fear and concern when two nurses were charged with criminal negligence.

When legal action is taken against nurses, it requires an immediate and sensitive institutional response. The hospital's primary objective in this case was to establish an infrastructure that would help front-line nurses focus on their role as caregivers, dispel rumours, and keep the lines of communication open.

Impromptu meetings and rounds provided relevant unit staff with an opportunity to discuss the issues; a counsellor from the Employee Assistance Program helped people express their feelings of anxiety and perceptions of helplessness; and Doris Grinspun, executive director of the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario, met with staff nurses to offer support on behalf of Ontario's nursing community. Nurses took comfort in the outpouring of support from individuals and hospitals in Ontario and across Canada.

In addition to these initial efforts to support the HSC nurses, hospital executives held a special Nursing Open Forum to share their concerns



with the nurses, and provide advice about how to deal with disruptions, parents' comments and the many stories and reactions that would inevitably occur during this difficult time. Nurses were encouraged to focus on the continued provision of high-quality nursing care, and demonstrate nursing's leadership by practising with dignity and integrity.

The nurses also needed advice on how to field inquiries, questions and phone calls from family and friends following media stories about the charges brought against their colleagues. While they empathized with their colleagues, it was all but impossible for the nurses to imagine being charged, fingerprinted, and photographed. They wanted to know how the nurses named in the charges were faring, if the hospital was still offering paid leave and legal support, and what they, staff nurses, could do to support their colleagues.

In response, the HSC Registered Nurses Council circulated notebooks for nurses to share messages, and a cadre of nurses regularly attend court appearances to demonstrate their support. There was an undeniable need to help these nurses in any way possible, including efforts to protect their privacy.

The most prevalent comment – internally and externally – has been, "This could happen to any one of us." This case demonstrates the element of personal and professional risk involved in nursing, and the strength and courage needed to carry on in the face of profound stress. Managing and coping during difficult times depends on strength, leadership and support at every level of the hospital and the profession. **RN**

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Illustration: Luc McLanson