

Nurses' Influence on Health Policy

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Abstract - Background: Nursing, being a multidimensional, interactive, interdisciplinary, and complex profession, the need for Health policies is a fact and very essential. This is because health policy affects the nursing profession and healthcare in general; therefore, nurses are expected to identify the issues deliberately and work with other decision makers to initiate, influence, develop and advance existing health care policies to achieve quality provision, accessibility and cost-effective care to improve the quality of life and welfare of society. Purpose: To determine the factors influencing nursing policy and make necessary recommendations for nurses to embrace decisions regarding policy development and implementation. Methods: Various databases and internet engines were searched to find all related information about the concept. Literature was searched in PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), and phrases including the following key words were used: "nurse policy", "politics", "health policy", "nurses influence on policy making/politics/health policy", "nurses challenges in policy making/politics/policy", and "importance of nursing policy making/politics/health policy"; 18 articles published from January 2001 to May 2022 were included. Results: Based on the analysis undertaken, nurses' policy influence is nurses' ability to influence decisions and affairs related to health through political knowledge, effective communication, and collaboration with other members of the health team, which results in the improvement of nurses' job environment and increasing patient outcomes. It was also noted that nurses' involvement in policy making has not improved over time majority of the authors revolve around the following to act as barriers to health policy development: lack of involvement; lack of knowledge and skills; negative image of nursing; lack of enabling structures; and lack of resources. Conclusion: In order for the nurses to shape their present and future profession, they need to be active rather than passive agents coming out to influence and take a lead in policy development, Utilization of health policy in nursing discipline, enables growth of a career giving it a guiding and a driving force, where the professional body of workforce (nurses) are directed towards achieving their mission and vision through their set course values and believes, therefore nurse leaders have a key role in mentoring, supporting and developing future nurse policy makers.

Keywords - Nurses, Nursing Influence, Health Policy, Nursing Policy, Politics.

1. Introduction

The concept of nurses' policy influence would be defined as "nurses' ability to have an effect on decisions and affairs related to health care using power, advocacy, and policy competence, which is acquired by policy awareness, effective communication, teamwork, and strengthening images and will result in improvement of nurses' and patients' outcomes" (University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2021).

This patient outcome equates to health outcomes, which are a basic human need. Across cultures, individuals require clinical intervention to remediate their injuries and illnesses, and communities benefit from the promotion of basic wellness practices and disease prevention (University of North Dakota, 2022).

Halirezah *et al.* (2021) stated that nurses comprise the major group of health care personnel who are mainly responsible for providing people with quality care in the rapidly changing and developing health care systems. Nurses also offer a unique and expert perspective on every aspect of the health care system, and have a key voice in ongoing efforts to improve the health of the public (American Nurses Association, n.d).

A study conducted by the Institute of Medicine (2011) states that above 3 million nurses globally make up the single largest segment of the health care workforce, and that they spend the greatest amount of time delivering care to patients as professionals. Nurses have valuable insights and unique abilities through experience to contribute as partners with other health care professionals in improving the quality and safety of care (*ibid*). Because nurses work in hospitals and the community, it makes them to hear and know how policy and politics affect their patients and the communities as a whole, but the initiation phase of health policy development becomes a problem (Alireza *et al.*, 2021).

In addition, nursing professionals represent 56% of the total health workforce in the world and develop both specific actions for caring for people and complementary activities to other health areas, thus providing good evidence of being in possession of diverse competencies to support the processes of formulation of health care policy in nursing Fernández, Giordano & Gutiérrez, 2022)

Despite the contributions made by nurses in health care settings, a study by Donley (2005) depicts that nurse leaders in the 21st century face a lot of challenges, including nursing workforce shortages, negative affectivity, generational workforce concerns, changing delivery systems and increasing clinical practice complexity, impacting them in the key role of policy development. Also, barriers to the participation of nursing leaders include the lack of involvement, insufficient knowledge and skills, negative image about nursing, lack of dynamic structures and insufficient resources (...*ibid*).

The Institute of Medicine (2011) also stated that health systems are rapidly developing and changing; therefore, nurses, as a part of this system, should move forward along with these changes. This is because nurses bring a unique perspective to health care policy development due to their educational training, professional values and ethics, advocacy skills, and experiential background (Ferguson, 2001) with the ultimate goal of health policies being to promote public welfare (University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2021). Since 2002, the WHO periodically published the “Strategic directions for strengthening nursing and midwifery”, making it explicit the need for the participation of Nursing professionals in the development of health care policy, to make them more efficient and effective in achieving global health goals (Fernández, Giordano & Gutiérrez, 2022)

Hence, Health policies affect the nursing profession and healthcare in general; therefore, nurses are expected to identify the issues deliberately and work with other decision makers to develop and advance existing healthcare policies.

1.1. Health policy

According to Halirezah *et al.* (2021), the World Health Organization (WHO) defined health policies as the decisions, plans, and actions undertaken to achieve specific health care goals within a society. It is a tool which nurses must utilize to improve the safety and quality of health care (University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2021) Health policy shapes the entire health care landscape, including both patients and providers. Nurses and nurse practitioners play a direct role in shaping, implementing and assessing the health policies in their communities (University of North Dakota, 2022). It defines a vision for the future, which in turn helps to establish targets and points of reference for the short and medium term. They are policies that are directly associated with the governmental health sector in any country and are involved in areas such as healthcare

services, costs, and healthcare quality and access. Quality provision, accessibility, and cost-effectiveness improve the quality of life and welfare of society (...ibid).

1.2. Importance of health policy to nurses

Policy and politics in health systems determine health and nursing practice (White & Salvage, 2019). According to the University of North Carolina Wilmington (2021), the nurses' influence in health policies protects patient safety, increases quality of care, facilitates their access to the required resources and promotes quality health care. We are reminded in the Sustainable Development Goals that health is interdependent and interconnected, in that the policies that most affect health are often not health policies, but cuts across multi-sectoral, thus should be collaborative in nature (White & Salvage, 2019).

According to the University of North Dakota (2022), the health policy is aspirational because it's designed to show health providers the kind of outcomes they're shooting for. Additionally, health policy helps to clarify priorities; it establishes roles and expectations for different groups, whether doctors, nurses or administrators. It also helps to build a consensus among the different participants in a community or a health system.

The participation of nurses in health policy development ensures patient safety, effectiveness, accessibility, and cost-effective services.

1.3. Why are nurses required during health policy formulation?

According to Halirezah et al. (2021), nursing staff are encouraged to participate in health policy for three reasons.

- First, nurses closely deal with patients and their families in a variety of settings; therefore, their comments can be considered as valuable sources for policy development.
- Second, different health policies have direct effects on nurses. Thus, policies should ensure a supportive work setting.
- Third, nurses play a key role in professional development and can highly contribute to the formation of appropriate and efficient health policies.

In addition, nurses' influence on health policy protects the quality of care by providing access to the required resources and opportunities they have (Arabi *et al.*, 2014).

More so, nurses bring in a unique perspective to health care policy development. because of their educational training, professional values and ethics, advocacy skills, and experiential background (University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2021)

1.4. Factors affecting health policy development by nurses

Many studies have come up with several reasons for the limited nursing participation in policy and politics, which are deemed to influence policy development, including but not limited to:

Lack of awareness, inadequate skills, and little opportunity for involvement. Another barrier is the limited formal health care policy education in nursing, time and resources. Additionally, studies show that nurses are not given sufficient support to generate the evidence needed to influence healthcare policy (Brokaw, 2022).

The political, environmental, technological and financial pressures in health care systems affect all practical settings. These changes can make opportunities for all personnel, especially nursing staff, to enhance their position and role in health care policies and management (University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2021).

According to White & Salvage (2019), nurse leaders were among the big obstacles to health policy development, for they make it into the settings where profound decisions that have effects on our health and health care, they are neither heard nor heeded.

Gender discrimination and social class to lack of status; many have little or no preparation for roles as government nurses, nurse directors, deans or heads of nursing associations; secondly, they do not know how to influence and shape policy, even within nursing.

Lack of mentoring by nursing leaders could also negatively affect their involvement in health policy development.

Additionally, Shariff (2014) identified the following factors that act as barriers and hinder nurse leaders' participation in health policy development. The categories identified included: lack of involvement(input called upon on an ad hoc basis; lack of opportunity; lack of opportunity at various levels; lack of forums; lack of experience; lack of active participation; top down approach to policy making and poor planning on the process of problem identification); lack of knowledge and skills (which included lack of tertiary education, lack of knowledge pertaining to health policy development process and throughout the stages of policy development, as well as lack of support and confidence).

Further, negative image of nursing also contributed as category of barrier to health policy development-nurses' contribution to the policy process is not being recognized as well as lack of opportunity to be involved in health policy development; lack of enabling structures and lack of resources (institutional structures and systems exclude nurse leaders; health policies are developed at national level and then rolled down to other levels; inadequate representation of nurse leaders; policy making positions are given to doctors; and other health professionals including doctors represent nurses and nursing issues at health policy development forums) (.ibid).

1.5. Factors Enhancing Nursing Health Policy

According to Shariff (2014), facilitators of health policy development comprise:

- Being involved;
- Being knowledgeable and skilled,
- Being Supported;
- Positive image of nursing;
- Enabling structures
- Provided with available resources.

Being involved: Involvement included having experience and exposure; being accorded opportunity; being present at all stages of policy development; seeking opportunity for participation, and being an active participant.

Being knowledgeable and skilled: These included being knowledgeable and skilled in health policy development, possessing a university education, and content related to health policy being covered in the curriculum.

Being supported, including benefiting from role models, supportive mentorship and networks for support and sharing experiences.

Positive image of nursing: Nursing must be considered a valuable partner in policy development, and nurses with potential must be appointed in policy-making positions, while they also must engage policy makers and engage the media to change the image of nursing.

Enabling structures: included a legislature which ensures that national nurse leaders are included in policy development; a directorate of nursing services; enhancing the numbers of nurses at the policy development level; nurses with the ability in health policy activity; and a gender balance.

Available resources; this included having resources, having business and financial skills, and being able to mobilize them for policy-making activity.

1.6. 5 Ways Nurses Can Shape Policy

Burke (2016) identified five ways nurses can shape policy. They include:

- Learning how policy is developed. Need to seek out areas of policy you want to influence.
- Learning who is participating in policy development and making contact with them.
- Exploring resources related to policy formulation.
- Investigating health policy agendas that local legislators have established for their terms in office.
- Volunteering to participate in policy meetings or related activities. As well as preparing a fact sheet, or assisting in preparing a report to inform policy decision-makers. Also, informing stakeholders of activities that offer opportunities to address policymakers.

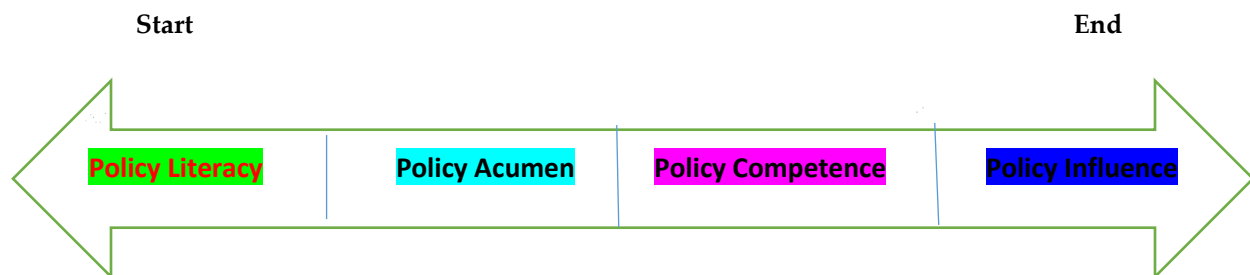
Other ways, according to the University of North Dakota (2022), included:

- Analyzing existing policies and pointing out inefficiencies, missing components, or opportunities to improve the delivery or affordability of care.
- Proposing new policies based on needs encountered in day-to-day practice.
- Meeting with policymakers, administrators and lobbyists to provide clinical insight into policy proposals.

2. Description of Policy Influence

2.1. Process of policy influence

Policy influence is described as moving on a spectrum which begins from policy literacy, moves forward to *policy acumen*, and then continues to policy competence *and finally* to policy influence.



2.1.1. Policy literacy

Literacy was first introduced by Malon (2005) and depicts that, for nurse beginners, there are two ways to practice policy literacy.

One way is referring to policy documents and asking questions related to what the problem is, etc., and another way is to participate in special political courses. When the abilities of beginners are developed, they can be involved in *policy acumen*.

2.1.2. Policy Acumen

Policy acumen is the ability to analyze policies. When the nurses acquire *policy acumen*, they can actively analyze organizational process and health care services.

2.1.3. Policy Competence

Policy competence is mostly related to management in health care. It is believed that managers who have acquired *policy competence* can direct their organizations in response to the challenges and opportunities related to political situations and also make policies which have desirable effects on their organizations.

2.1.4. Policy Influence

It is the final step, which refers to the nurses who are capable of giving special consultation to the governments about nursing issues and have important roles in the development, implementation, and evaluation of government policies about health care.

It is important to note that the second attribute of policy influence is **Power**, which is the ability to achieve goals and also *Power* is the inherent ability to influence others, where the potential factors for maximum influence will be achieved by strengthening the basis of *Power*.

Because *Power* is an essential aspect for leadership, nurses should acquire enough information about the presence and place of power fields, of which nurses need and should know about *power* “power with others” instead of “power over others.” Indeed, nurses need *Power* as one attribute of policy influence to protect the quality of care and to change organizations.

The third attribute of policy influence is **advocacy**, where nurses have long been known as patient *advocates*. Without involvement in health policies, the *advocating* role of nurses will be ineffective and meaningless. Nurses as *advocates* should know that when they want to influence decision makers, they need to understand that they are working in an “open system,” so that they are affected by many factors. An *advocate* should ensure that everything influencing decision makers for developing a plan has been understood and considered, as well as the need to recognize conflicts as important components to success and manage them effectively.

3. Way Forward

In order for the nurses to shape their present and future profession, they need to be active rather than passive agents coming out to influence and take a lead in policy development, meaning that they are required to understand not only the content related to a health issue, but also to be involved in the policy process taking into consideration the context, the stakeholders, the health of the public and their interests (White & Salvage, 2019).

It is only through well-educated and savvy nurse leaders who understand the political realities as well as the agenda-setting and policy formulation processes that health care change will occur (University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2021).

Nurses need to understand the levels of *Power* they have and know who controls the resources of health services in their organizations, to be able to negotiate for their control of policy formulation since these policies affect their patients, families, themselves, and the whole health care system.

Nursing institutions and regulatory bodies should prepare and encourage nurses to work as policymakers rather than implementers and advocate for the rightful place of nurses at policy-making forums (Rasheed, Younas & Mehdi, 2020).

WHO emphasized that health policy and practice require actions from multiple sectors, and decisions that are made in these sectors must be responsive and sensitive to the concerns of health (University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2021). Also, they reiterated that the government and all health care stakeholders need to invest in nursing education, employment, and leadership, providing a vision and a plan for policies.

Because, studies pointed out that leaders play a key role in influencing policy development, they are therefore required to: Help other nurses, practice to speak in public and equip them with good communication skills so that they are comfortable participating in public discourse and boardroom discussions, as well as training other nurses how to write letters, participate in electoral office, aid in fundraise and to campaign for causes and issues and nursing policy important to them (Brokaw, 2022).

The truth is, any nurse can influence policy and politics at the local, state, and federal levels. Locally, nurses can become politically active by assuming leadership positions in the healthcare system or contacting elected officials about legislation affecting the industry. Nurses can obtain formal training in politics, become involved in city councils and committees, or even run for local office. And something as simple as exercising the right to vote can impact healthcare policy. (...ibid).

According to the Institute of Medicine (2011), they pointed out that, for nurses to succeed in their policy development, they should ensure their members are well-prepared. The profession should institute residency training for nurses, increase the percentage of nurses who attain a bachelor's degree to 80 percent by the year 2020, and double the number of nurses who pursue doctoral degrees.

4. Recommendations

Nurses should be knowledgeable about all issues related to the health system, and not just caring issues. It should be noted that days of just carrying out the prescribed orders are over for nurses globally, and now is the time for nurses to become health legislators and develop practical policies to be implemented at their workplaces.

Both the national and county governments need to support the Ministry of Health in terms of proper funding to support the Senior Nurse Posts Directorate in government health sectors and elsewhere. In addition, to collaborate in producing and implementing a national action plan for nursing as advocated by WHO, within a country's health strategy, which in turn can engage and motivate thousands of nurses and other stakeholders

Nurses' ability to be active in health policy development will help them to gain experience in the policy development process, gain knowledge on health systems, policy research and develop leadership skills.

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