Why Nursing is Still the Most Trusted Profession

By Jennifer Larson, contributor
January 5, 2012 - As 2012 begins, nurses are once again at the very top of the list of the nation's most trusted professions.

For 21 years, the Gallup organization has conducted an annual poll that asks a selection of adults to rate the honesty and ethical standards of a series of professions. Nurses were included in the list of professions starting in 1999, and since then, nursing has topped the list every single year, except for one (2001).

The latest results, which were released in early December 2011, showed that nurses were not only at the top, but they tied their own record of positive responses. Eighty-four percent of the respondents rated nurses' ethics and honesty as "very high or high." Pharmacists rated a "very high or high" response rate of 73 percent, and medical doctors received 70 percent.

Amy Garcia, MSN, RN, chief programs officer for the American Nurses Association, noted that nurses are obligated to put the patient first, always, as stipulated by the Code of Ethics for Nurses. Nurses are charged with exemplifying caring, competence and service, and people respond positively to those qualities, she said.

"I think nurses are gratified that we have earned the trust of the public," she said.

Judy Halstead, Ph.D., RN, president of the National League for Nursing, agreed.
"I think the public responds to nurses' long-standing, demonstrated commitment to patient-centered care, which includes patients and their families (and) significant others," she said. "They trust that nurses will listen to their concerns and serve as an advocate for their needs."

But while the mantle of "most honest" or "most ethical" is indeed a great honor, nursing leaders said they are not content to simply enjoy it. There is still work to be done, on behalf of advancing the nursing profession and advocating for the best interests of patients.

"We have the responsibility to continually strive to ensure that we put the health of the nation and the health care interests of our patients first and foremost in the decisions that we make as a profession," said Halstead.

Because they have earned the trust of the public, nurses must also work to ensure that their voices are represented at all policy decision-making tables, Halstead said.

According to Beverly Malone, Ph.D., RN, chief executive officer of the National League for Nursing, nurses need to be involved when decisions are being made, from the boards of trustees of local organizations on up to powerful national bodies.

"We do it because the public trusts us to be at the table," he said.

She continued, "To me, mentoring is a huge piece of that. If I get to the table and then I don't turn around and help others get to the table to mentor them and help them along...I'm not helping. So mentoring is a huge part of operationalizing the trust."

But Sandy Summers, RN, MSN, MPH, executive director of The Truth About Nursing, said she hopes that nurses will not be afraid to work on earning greater respect. She encourages nurses to speak up about their professional responsibilities and really inform people about what they do on the job.

"Nurses just kind of hide; they hide what they do," she said. "We need nurses to get out there and tell [people] about all the great work that they're doing."

Summers maintains a list of actions on The Truth About Nursing's website for nurses to help them work toward that goal and promote nursing's image (see http://www.truthaboutnursing.org/action). For example, Summers suggested that nurses offer to participate in "health minute" broadcasts on local television and radio programs; as patient educators, nurses are a natural fit to do this type of education. She also suggests that nurses write op-eds and volunteer to let reporters shadow them at work for a day, to see what kind of work they do.

"We shouldn't limit ourselves to just the patients before us," she said. "We should speak to the wider world."

Halstead hopes that the profession's reputation for trustworthiness and ethics will inspire young nurses.
"I think that nursing students and future nurses need to understand that being a member of the nursing profession brings with it a legal and ethical responsibility to always hold themselves to the highest level of professional accountability in the care they deliver to their patients," she said.

And Garcia hopes that hospitals will be reminded by this recognition of the public's trust in nurses of the...
need to provide safe staffing levels. Patients and their families are counting on nurses to be there for them, and hospitals can ensure that that continues to happen by providing enough nurses to do their jobs appropriately.

“The public expects it,” Garcia said.

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