

Editorial

“Don’t let a good crisis go to waste...”



Winston Churchill is credited with saying, “Never let a good crisis go to waste” with World War II nearing its end. This quote causes us to look for the silver lining during a crisis.

The past two COVID-19 years taught us to persevere in the most difficult situations at primary care clinics and at the hospitals. Critical ill patients, concerned and very worried family members and friends with very few nurses available, were but a few of the challenges that healthcare leaders had to deal with. To be the nurse, the closest family and friend to each of the patients admitted and in isolation with limited knowledge of what we were dealing with, took courage, energy and tons of patience from each of us. Healthcare workers must be commended for remaining at the coalface and giving hope to their patients.

As the future looks bleak as nurses and other healthcare workers struggle to recover and to regain their strength and enthusiasm, opportunities must be sought where they might not have been before. It is now the time to reflect and to look back on the finer detail of how we managed to deal with the difficulties and the challenges.

Nursing organisations have to get their house in order and use this opportunity to completely transform their financial health, assuring that they exit the pandemic far better off. Make the time to find your organisations’ silver lining so that we do not let this crisis go to waste. The three areas each organisation must use to find and explore its silver lining are to know its revenue, its expenses, and its people.

The pandemic taught us, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts” (Winston Churchill).

The pandemic raised many questions about hospital layout, patient-specific needs, and the different patient care (isolation, high care, oxygenation, and ventilation) protocols. We have to revisit the competencies of all healthcare workers, and update the training material in such a way that we will never again have to place our staff in situations where they might not be safe.

The power of using simulation training and practice to prepare healthcare workers for situations one hopes never will arise, has to be considered to improve current systems. Simulation training helps reinforce clinical understanding, allows practice until competent, and can be conducted when a large number of nurses must be trained on a specific skill.

In a study on the views of Swedish nurses, nurses identified three categories of knowledge and skills perceived as crucial by nurses who had experience working with COVID-19 patients: (i) knowledge and skills empowering nurses to lower pressure on themselves, (ii) knowledge and skills empowering nurses to support others, and (iii) knowledge and skills needed for safe nursing care¹.

What are the competencies most needed? These competencies include amongst others:

1. Soft skills like interpersonal skills, stress management, and problem-solving in uncertain circumstances. Adaptability, resilience, and stress management are crucial to cope with new situations and to ensure their mental health.
2. The skill to communicate with patients and their families and to assist all clients in the optimal use of social media and electronic communication to remain in close contact with their loved ones, will for time to come, remain the most significant lesson learnt. Emotional support of patients relied solely on healthcare providers and the use of their interpersonal skills.
3. Non-verbal communication skills – patients can no longer see nurses’ faces; we have to learn how to smile with our eyes and to communicate from behind a mask.
4. Knowledge and being familiar with the management of pandemics and infectious diseases.
5. The importance of the knowledge and skills to empower nurses to support others.
6. Infection prevention and control knowledge and understanding as well as the realistic use of all the infection control principles and the application thereof was a wake-up call for many healthcare workers. We all knew the importance of hand hygiene and disinfection routines, but the continuing audit and assessment of the correct implementation of handwashing skills were suddenly the most important manner of survival.
7. A quick practical session on handwashing and the correct use of personal protective equipment (PPE) must now be a fully-fledged competency to be taught and assessed at least annually. The correct technique of donning and doffing, as well as providing enough space for staff to safely comply with good isolation practice, has to be kept in mind when designing a healthcare facility.

8. Patients, family, friends, and the community members must continuously be reminded of the reasons why overcrowding in a healthcare facility is not recommended. Together with the POPI act requirements, the health of already compromised patients must always be taken into consideration. Health care institutions remain responsible for providing a safe environment for all their clients and therefore have the right to implement rules such as limiting the number of visitors as well as patients according to the available space.
9. Clinical skills required to observe and care for patients with respiratory emergencies such as intubating and extubating a patient, managing a ventilator, and caring for a ventilated patient.
10. The importance of being aware of unexpected symptoms and subtle changes in situations where the healthcare professionals are not familiar with all the aspects of the illness. This, in particular, reminds us of the importance to interpret and think critically about the observations we have made and recorded.

11. Positioning, vital signs management and medication management when dealing with large numbers of patients were crucial skills identified during the pandemic.

The pandemic might not have been “a good crisis”, but it taught us the importance of being prepared for the unknown. It also taught us to look out for each other, to take hands and to work together. Let us celebrate Nurses’ Day in 2022 by taking the lessons learned during this pandemic, and renewing our systems and our vows to be prepared for what might come.

Annelie Meiring

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Reference

1. Mohammadimehr R. Crucial knowledge and skills for caring in a pandemic situation. Linnaeus University. Available from: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1565530/FULLTEXT01>. Accessed 2 May 2022.