

## Editorial

### Where have all the nurses gone...?



At the start of a new year we look back at the 158 years since Florence Nightingale founded the first nursing school in London, asking ourselves "Where have all the nurses gone, long time passing? Where have all the nurses gone, long time ago? Where have all the nurses gone?.." (Pete Seeger – *Where have all the flowers gone*)

"The shortage of skilled and competent nurses..", a statement continuously made, is a shortage that has been with us for several years as the healthcare industry simply can't keep up with the demand. The growth in the population, the increased emphasis on preventative care, the quadruple disease burden of the country, the aging population, economic conditions, and continuous healthcare changes are all contributing to the increasing demand for nurses. The reforms in the healthcare system with the National Health Insurance (NHI) being piloted and ready to be implemented in some areas, will give thousands of people access to much improved healthcare facilities – more nurses and healthcare professionals will be needed in response. These factors are only a few of the reasons for the demand for nurses in 2018 to be at the highest level ever experienced in South Africa. This trend will continue way into the future with the current nurse training constraints taking their toll.

The question to be answered, however, is not only how will we increase the number of nurses, but it is also important

to ask what nursing specialties are in the highest demand due to the country-wide shortages? Nurse managers in the acute care settings will list specialties such as intensive care nurses, operating room nurses, neonatology and emergency room nurses as critical shortages, whereas the primary health environment is desperately in need of midwives, primary health care and community health nurses. The training and development of nurses must address the needs of the healthcare sector and not only focus on increasing the numbers.

Nurses are seeing increasing numbers of patients with more complex and serious conditions than ever before and nursing has changed dramatically in the past century. The challenge is to deliver high quality care despite the increasing pressure on the healthcare system. A proactive, strategic approach to the development of the nursing workforce in South Africa is urgently needed. The strategy needs to have clear priorities that are agreed on and take into account the unique needs of the South African population. A nursing strategy for nursing by nurses – this will result in a strategy ensuring that the nursing profession is positioned to proactively respond to the ever-changing demands of the South African population.

Professional nurses and midwives are essential in setting out a vision for nursing in South Africa, we need to formalise a view on how to improve the current situation. The profession must be at the centre of realising a future where the challenges of improving care, reducing inequalities and using health and care resources wisely will be met. The pace of the change in nursing competencies and skills required will accelerate to keep up with the developments in medical technologies and the changes in workplace settings.

2018 offers the nursing profession the opportunity to set the scene for the future of nursing through active participation in finding a solution to the question: "Where have all the nurses gone..?"