



The Politics of Caring

By Michelle Artz

Ask Not What Nursing Can Do for You . . .

Nurses have a lot of power.

Nurses are privileged to belong to a profession that commands a level of credibility and respect that few others in health care or any other field can claim. The Gallup Organization's 2005 annual poll on professional honesty and ethical standards ranked nurses number one. With one exception, after September 11, 2001 (when nurses ranked second following firefighters), nursing has been the highest-rated profession in Gallup's "honesty and ethics" survey since their initial inclusion in 1999.

Given the level of credibility nurses possess, a paramount question for all of us should be: "How are nurses using this incredible asset to advocate on behalf of our profession and our patients?"

Nurses have a better view than most of the health care challenges facing our country and the very real impact of the growing nursing shortage. It's clear that our entire health care system is in need of real change and that policies to address the nursing shortage and workplace issues are long overdue.

The power to enact desperately needed policy changes such as enhanced funding for nursing education, safe workplaces and staffing levels, and removal of barriers to practice for advanced practice nurses rests with our state and federal policymakers. And the power to elect them and urge their action on issues fundamental to nursing and health care rests with *you*.

Your elected officials make decisions every day that affect your patients, your practice, and your profession, and these same elected officials are

campaigning for your vote this November.

Do you know where your elected officials stand on nursing and health care issues? Are your members of Congress cosponsoring legislation on safe nurse staffing (HR 1372 and S 71), Medicaid reimbursement for advanced practice registered nurses (HR 2716), or prohibition of mandatory overtime (HR 791 and S 351)? Have they supported increases in funding for nursing workforce development or backed fit-testing of respirators to help to protect nurses from pandemic flu?

Do you know where your elected officials stand on nursing and health care issues?

Elected officials and candidates for federal office are quick to say "I just love nurses," or "I have a sister who is a nurse," or "Nurses do such great work," but the truth is, while most elected officials profess their admiration for the nursing profession, their actions don't always reflect their words. It's up to you, their constituents, to educate them, to urge them to action, and to hold them accountable when their positions and records don't match their rhetoric. The issues and bills listed above represent just a few of the opportunities members of Congress had this year to take a stand for nursing. Do you

know whether your congressional representatives did so?

Answering this question is one of the first steps toward using your political power. Nurses are already advocates in their workplaces and everyday lives. By learning where elected officials stand on nursing and health care issues and legislation, communicating with them to thank them for their support or to urge them to reconsider opposition, and sharing first-hand experiences and expertise that can help shape policy, RNs can apply these same advocacy skills to a broader sphere.

Nurses can hold their elected officials accountable by volunteering for candidates, contributing to campaigns and heading for the polls on Election Day armed with knowledge about the candidates' positions and actions. Electing pro-nursing candidates is one of the best ways to ensure that RNs and patients have partners at the state and federal levels in the fight for quality, affordable and accessible health care.

Do you need more information on your members of Congress or health care and nursing issues? Visit www.anapoliticalpower.org or reach out to the ANA Government Affairs Department by e-mailing gova@ana.org. Find out what's going on in your state legislature by contacting your state's ANA-affiliated state nursing association (for a list, visit www.ana.org/cmas/cmaaddr.cfm). And don't forget to register to vote!

If only a fraction of our nation's 2.9 million RNs became involved, even in the smallest way, our collective voice would be an unstoppable force for change for our profession, our patients, and our nation's crumbling health care system. ▼

Michelle Artz is associate director of the Department of Government Affairs at the ANA.

