Nursing silent on LGBTQ health: Rebel nurses provide hope

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Consider This…

Nursing Silent on LGBTQ Health: Rebel Nurses Provide Hope

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Why has the nursing profession as a whole failed to take notice of LGBTQ issues? One of the major nursing policy advocacy organizations in the US – the American Academy of Nursing – just last year, became the first national nursing organization to speak publicly in support of an LGBTQ issue – marriage equality.

Not only have US-based nursing organizations been “hands off”, but, for the most part, nursing scientists have as well. Eliason, Dibble, and DeJoseph (2010) examined all of the articles published in the 10 top nursing journals over a 5-year period. They found that only 8 articles, or 0.16%, were about LGBTQ health, and of those, most of the authors were from outside the US. Some of this could be because of the kind of research that is funded in the US, although this may be improving. The Institute of Medicine (2011) published a comprehensive report on the status of LGBT Health, and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) now supports LGBTQ-related research. Another reason that the US nursing profession is silent on LGBTQ issues is because it is generally heterosexist and conservative (Shattell, 2013).

There have been some US nurse scientists who have fought to bring LGBTQ health issues and a more progressive nursing agenda to the fore. For example, in the early 1980s Cassandra: Radical Feminist Nurses Network organized and formed a non-hierarchical national organization of women who believed in feminist philosophy (Cassandra, n.d.). Incidentally, the name “Cassandra” was chosen to honor a piece of writing by Florence Nightingale in 1852 – “Cassandra: An Angry Outcry Against the Plight of Victorian Women”. Cowling, Chinn, and Hagedorn (2000) more than 10 years later wrote the Nurse Manifesto to increase the power and independence of nursing, which was founded on feminist and equality principles. A more recent example is one of the first books authored by nurses about LGBTQ health, “LGBTQ Cultures: What Health Care Professionals Need to Know About Sexual and Gender Diversity” (Eliason, Dibble, DeJoseph, & Chinn, 2009). Lavender Health Resource, also developed by nurses, is another nurse-led initiative (Lavender Health Resource, n.d.). Another is “Lesbian Health 101” (Dibble & Robertson, 2010), which is the first comprehensive textbook devoted exclusively to lesbian health, providing a guide for clinicians, students and lesbians themselves.

Mental health nurses and mental health nurse scientists have been much more progressive on LGBTQ health issues than other areas of nursing. For example, in 2008, the first author (Shattell) guest edited a special issue of Issues in Mental Health Nursing, which was devoted entirely to LGBT mental health. To our knowledge, this was the first special topic issue related to LGBT health in nursing. In 2010, the Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing published a special issue about LGBTQ youth. Archives of Psychiatric Nursing has published several articles on LGBTQ health (see De Santis, et al., 2012; Hall, 1993; Smith, 1993).

Although mental health nurses have perhaps been more progressive than other clinical specialties, more is needed. Nurses in all areas of practice encounter LGBTQ people, and LGBTQ people have health issues that touch on every health specialty. The neglect to address LGBTQ health issues that has prevailed in nursing to date cannot be sustained if nurses truly aspire to provide quality, culturally competent care to all. This is an issue of social injustice and health care disparity that nurses can and must address.

Fortunately, there is hope. This hope comes from a new generation of nurse activists, providers, educators, and scientists. Recently, the well-attended first Rebellious Nursing Conference, held in Philadelphia, PA, holds promise for pushing a more progressive agenda, for which we are grateful. The Web site makes the agenda very clear: “We seek to create a world where all people receive and have a say in competent, compassionate, and respectful care in their communities (Rebellious Nursing Conference, n.d.). As opposed to a world where nurses are divided by education and training, as well as structural forms of oppression that pervade society, such as racism and sexism, we seek to include all nurses in our organizing on equal footing, by confronting what divides us” (see http://rebelnursing.org/about-rn/). At the conference, all sexual and gender identities were acknowledged openly, and there were many discussions in many different sessions that addressed the intersecting oppressions of sex, gender, race, economics. You name it, Rebel Nurses will tackle it!

Some of the activism envisioned by Rebel Nurses will come from those attending the conference – many of whom were students and nurses who have recently graduated from basic and advanced practice programs. But the ripple effect from this conference promises to give rise to a level of activism around social justice in…
health care, and LGBTQ issues specifically, which has not existed until now. The existence of Rebel Nurses raises awareness in nursing - an awareness that will begin to place LGBTQI issues on the table where the facts of LGBTQ health prevail to overcome prejudice, stereotypes, stigma, and silence.

References
