

"Like Blind Kittens" – Changes in the Role of Community Nurses in Israel¹

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Recent new trends in the health system have the potential to affect the role of community nurses. These include population ageing, programmes to improve the quality of medical care, a shortage of medical and nursing manpower and the academisation of the nursing profession.

This study analyses changes in community nurses' roles following the big development in community medicine and examines the attitudes of nurse managers.

Using qualitative methods, we conducted in-depth interviews with 55 health fund managers, nurses, and relevant professionals from the Ministry of Health, Israel Medical Associations, hospitals and scientific societies, surveying respondents from different levels of management and regions. The diversity of interviewees allowed for a broad perspective on the processes that the nursing discipline is currently undergoing.

We found that in all the health funds nurses are engaged in a variety of activities, including: caring for chronic patients, health-promotion, active participation in improving quality etc. Further, in all health funds there was a sense that there are not enough nurses. At the same time, there is a trend toward expanding nurses' knowledge and training.

The study also highlights differences between the health funds, for example in the amount of responsibility given to nurses under Ministry of Health guidelines. In

1 Thanks to the Changes in Role of Community Nurses Study Group.

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some funds, more activities are executed by nurses, while in others they may perform activities only under supervision. Furthermore, there are differences in the way that nurses are included in health fund management, whereby in some funds they are fully incorporated, while in others only partially. The study also addresses nurses' perceptions of obstacles to the development of their profession. Community nurses have the knowledge and skills that enable them to take an increasingly important part in the care process.

The expected shortage of doctors and increase in morbidity present an opportunity for nurses to promote their profession and encourage a better division of labour. The integrative care model also allows them to be incorporated into more meaningful roles.

The fact that nurses are engaged in so many areas is a basis for recognition in law, to provide them with broader authority. This would fit in well with global trends, whereby community nurses have the status of experts in various areas and have been awarded increased responsibilities.

The study reveals that seniors in the health system feel that the community nursing profession has been changing rapidly and become more professional, as well as demanding more extensive training than in the past. The study also found that nurses are prepared for these changes, such that should the required organisational effort be invested, it would be possible to advance the profession to higher levels.