

THE RN IN INDEPENDENT PRACTICE YOU!

By Sandra M. Cerul

Welcome to the Independent Practice of the Profession of Nursing.

Let's talk about getting started in independent practice. Do you need to win the lottery to get started? Well of course it would make things easier. But then it would make things easier even if you didn't go into private practice! Before the money question, you need to determine where your field of interest and ability lies. All nurses start off as generalists, knowing a wide range of basic information and then as the years of practice and experience increase, we begin to find a special area we like and are interested in and where we have gained expertise. We develop areas where we have a combination of knowledge and know-how that we, and other of our peers and our patients recognize as being beneficial to them.

In my own case, my initial interest was maternal-child health, a long way from the home health area I am in today. I was the first RN Lamaze instructor in the United States. That alone would have set the stage for independent practice today, but at the time, no nurses were in independent practice. I found home health fun, convenient, as a newly married bride (no weekends then!), but for years, I told others my field was MCH. But time after time I wandered back into the home health field, including a stint with a church related group doing volunteer work. Finally I came to the realization that this was the area I was best at! The med-surg component that fills home health was one I had felt I was very weak in. In actuality, because of these feelings of inadequacy, it was the area that I had actually done extensive study in over the years. As I learned, I found I had developed an expertise in the area of teaching patients about disease process, medications, early interventions, and preventative measures. Patients would comment about how well they understood what was happening to them and what to look for and report. Many finally understood that some of their medications

were going to cause some side effects, but they were manageable, and they would become more compliant in taking them. Coworkers began to ask me how to chart and teach about different diseases for cases that were difficult. My supervisor asked me to develop teaching guides for the staff to use on some of the major illnesses and conditions we regularly saw.

Taking a clear look at what you are doing and what both patients and other health care workers recognize as your strengths will give you a good idea what your area of expertise is. From there you can begin looking at how this can be developed into an area of independent practice.

Surprise! When you start to look at yourself in independent practice, most, if not all of you, are going to find that you are an expert and have been in independent practice for years!



Yes! Your coworkers have been depending upon your ability and skills and utilizing them at work. Your neighbors have been calling or dropping in on you for advice and care, your family considers you their resident expert. You have been doing independent practice. You just haven't been getting paid for it!

Now if you are like most nurses (i.e.-me), you are aware that people (read that nurses too) try to get free advice from other professionals. And what do these nice professionals usually say to us? "Call my office and make an appointment!" Okay! Now - where is your office? It may be your kitchen table or your living room. Or maybe you only do phone consultations. But in practice, you have already established an office and people know where and how to reach you. They all have recognized you as the "free" source of information and care.

You already know that part of why you have professional liability insurance is for anything you do as a nurse that may be outside the scope of your employment. See, even you knew you were in independent practice!

Whether any of you are truly going to make the transition into independent practice your goal, or while you are considering it, you should still consider hanging out your 'shingle'. Announce to the public that you are a professional who has an office. This one act would do more to push the role of nursing as professional than any other act we could do. Write your full name with "RN" after it. Now draw a box around it. Maybe you want to add "Office Hours by Appointment" and a phone number. But just the initial shingle with your name announces to the public that you are a professional. And yes, that license and registration would look nice, framed and hanging in your kitchen

office.

Do you see what is happening? None of you has quit your job, changed your work. The financial investment is still minimal and yet you have changed your entire status. Now when you are giving out free advice, you doing it as the true professional you are. Start keeping nursing notes. See the length of time it takes you to give that advice. Put a nursing diagnosis on what you are doing. This is where you begin to realize how much of your everyday life and ministering is influenced by your role as a professional nurse in independent practice.

This is often when you can begin to say to someone, "Does your insurance cover nursing visits?" (Most don't - that's another whole article!) And then, "My usual fee for consultation/care is \$ _____. Yes! Fill in the blank with at least the amount per hour you are being paid by an employer. If you are still uncomfortable, you can then advise this friend, family member, neighbor, that you will treat them at no charge or only charge them for the supplies you will need to use. This is hard to do. And giving in and doing care for free is the weak answer. But it is how we start to educate both ourselves and the public to see us as professionals.

The public, your family, your friends know what nurses do. They don't require a lot of explanation. Your weekly phone calls and visits from your neighbors already have taught you that! What is new to them - and you - is the idea that this expert knowledge which we have gone to school and studied and practiced to refine is not free! We are no longer in the age of little ladies who sit at home doing charity care. Most, if not all of us have to work for a living. Would you think about calling your neighborhood electrician down the street to come over and fix a broken light switch without asking for payment? Would you stop at the corner gas station and ask the friendly, nice, pleasant mechanic to fix your muffler without paying her? No! Of course not! They have announced to you and the public that they are in business! They have a sign out! They have business cards! They send out bills with their name on them and expect payment. And they get it. Why are we giving all these professional services away free?

Hopefully, I have spurred you to begin to think and to make some effort to move forward towards the goal of independent practice. It is time to take some of the first steps to the door that holds new opportunities and new possibilities. We as nurses are not sick and recovering. But we have not yet reached our optimal level of wellness - of challenging ourselves to become all that we are capable of becoming.

"Onward to glory we go!"

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