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Short Commentary

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Let us be Unequivocal about Social Justice in Nursing

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A search for the phrase social justice on the website of the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) will produce 406 results, however none of these results refer to the phrase. I did this search to collect information about references in the NMC documents that portrays the organisation's interest and position on social justice issues in nursing. I have research interest in social justice and currently investigating ways of empowering student nurses to increase their awareness of and participation in actions that promote social justice in their professional practice. A start with search for references to social justice in the NMC documents is justified by its statutory responsibilities and legal purpose "to protect, promote and maintain the health, safety and wellbeing of the Public" (NMC order, 2001). One way that the NMC demonstrate this responsibility is by setting standards that schools or universities of nursing should adhere to in framing their curriculum (NMC, 2018).

The failing of the NMC to make a clear reference to social justice challenges its stance on promoting public or social responsibilities of nurses. This contrast the significance that has been attached to social justice by other reputable national and international nursing organisations, such as, the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA), American Nurses Association (ANA) and International Council of Nurses (ICN). Their recognition of social justice as nursing responsibilities are evident in the forms of explicit references in documents and creation of specific documents on the topic (ANA, 2014; CNA, 2009, 2010; ICN, 2012). The failure of the NMC to make specific reference to and adopt definitive pronouncement on social justice contribute to the elusiveness of the topic in nursing scholarship in the United Kingdom. My research interests cover issues relating to nursing responsibilities, visibility in nursing documents and integration into curriculum. These issues have implications for nursing education, practice and research, and for the health and wellbeing of individuals and populations.

It is plausible to state that nursing profession is rooted in social justice responsibilities, as exemplified by the pioneering activities of Mary Seacole, Florence Nightingale, Lillian Wald, among others. The caring and many times the advocacy roles by

these pioneers continues to present-day nursing practices, and extend beyond intersections of social class, ethnicity, race, gender, or similar background.

Social justice in health and nursing care can be understood in several contexts based on seminal definitions and theories. The term refers to equitable distribution and redistribution of resources for positive health outcomes, recognition and removal of social and political barriers that impinge on health, and promoting parity of participation in decision-making for the allocation and utilisation of health resources. These are situations that relate to practices, policies and systems that create and perpetuate poverty, unemployment, homelessness, discrimination, lack of education, among other social malaise. The social consequences of these conditions can include poor health and negative health outcomes for individuals and communities.

In practising social justice, as an example, for a person living with diabetes or other diseases for that matter, the nurse is mandated to not only provide hands-on or bedside nursing care, but also initiate and advocate for health policies and social systems that eradicate the causes of diabetes or other diseases. In the current global COVID-19 pandemic, several instances have brought to the fore the disparities in health care and health outcomes for people in care homes versus those in National Health Service (NHS) hospitals, and Black and Ethnic Minorities health care providers versus their European or other White counterparts. For these and several reasons, it is incumbent for the NMC to make clear statements in their documents and or even create a charter that is dedicated to social justice issues in the nursing profession. Such a courageous, timely and necessary action by an organisation with international standing will not only influence schools of nursing in the UK to develop curriculums that distinctly integrate the topic, but also make clarion call for similar national organisations to follow suit. A step in this direction will help student nurses and our future nurses become aware of the critical conditions that are the causes of poor health which can be due to unfair, unjust and unequal social and political policies, systems and practices.

This argument can extend to the position that with the persisting health disparities in the UK and across the globe, it is imperative that nurses should not only become aware of, but also engage in actions that transforms social injustices that affects people's health. There is emphasis in the nursing curriculum for students to understand and reflect on ethical issues that they encounter in their practice. As a stand-alone, awareness or reflection on unjust social health situations do not bring about necessary progressive transformation. In other words, awareness or reflection that is devoid of appropriate action is devoid of progressive change. Therefore, critical nursing learning activities should make space for theories to be translated into practices that promote sustainable changes for improvement in health outcomes. This form of learner experience can be referred to as *praxis*, which can be understood as the use of theory to engage in practices that promote positive transformation. Learning opportunities for nursing students to become aware of and engage in actions for social justice or against social injustice, are neither explicit in the NMC standards nor in nursing curriculums. This situation hinders the ability of student nurses to consciously recognise and participate in activities for correcting structural inequalities and inequities that manifest as poor health and negative health outcomes.

In response to the issues raised here, my doctoral research project is investigating how to empower student nurses for social justice praxis. My aim is to understand the critical factors that enable student nurses to develop awareness of and take actions for social justice issues that affects people's health. The research project will address questions such as, what are the definitions and attributes of social justice in nursing, how to become aware of social justice

issues in clinical practice, what actions promote social justice in nursing, and what are the possibilities for integrating and increasing the visibility of social justice in nursing education. This information is gathered from student nurses in semi-structured interviews and lecturers of nursing in focus groups. These participant groups have classroom and practice experiences of social structural issues that affect people's health and wellbeing. The preferred outcome is to influence the NMC to write unequivocal statements and standards about social justice nursing responsibilities, and for schools of nursing to develop curriculums that are rooted in these responsibilities.

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