Learning to Teach

My eldest child recently graduated from college. She has decided to pursue teaching elementary school. In California, as in other states, college graduates need an additional year of education to obtain a teaching credential. This extra year involves some didactic classes and two semesters of student teaching. As you can deduce, this is a very structured and concentrated sort of internship. At the end of the school year, she will be able to apply for a job as a full-fledged teacher. If someone were to ask me to choose which job was more important, teaching children or professional nursing, I would be hard pressed to answer, but I do know that the educational requirements we set for these two noble professions are quite diverse. It seems to me that we should expect at least as much education for nurses as we do for our teachers, but that is a topic for another time.

We recently have received notice of a spate of new master’s programs for nurses to specifically prepare nursing educators. The impetus for these programs is the current and expected-to-worsen serious shortage of nursing faculty. As bad as we know the nursing shortage to be, the shortage of qualified nursing teachers is even more dire. By and large to date, someone became qualified to be a nursing instructor by virtue of his or her education (master’s or PhD) and, sometimes, experience. Unfortunately, as we all know firsthand, the ability to “do” and the ability to “teach someone how to do” are very separate skills. The teaching profession understands that well. For people to possess general or even specific knowledge of subject matter is not enough. They also need to learn how to impart that knowledge to students. Too often, institutions of higher learning skip that last step. The result is that students are involved in a game of chance. Perhaps they will get a teacher skilled in how to teach or perhaps they will get a teacher who may be a crackerjack clinician but who lacks the skills to know how to impart that knowledge to others. My hope is that these new graduate degree programs will incorporate course work that will actually teach nurses how to teach.

Any graduate program must be evaluated based on what it has to offer a student and its philosophy and approach to the delivery of knowledge. We can share information about programs as we hear about them (see People and Events, p. 897), but evaluating the programs falls to the person who considers applying. Those of you who are interested in getting a master’s degree in nursing education or whose career goals involve teaching need to take a critical look at the programs you are considering. It should be easy to see the focus on clinical expertise in graduate programs, but you may need to dig a bit deeper if you want to know that a program can offer some of the not-so-obvious elements. I found myself asking what would constitute a set of courses for nursing educators. Will the faculty members be nurses or educators or some combination of both? Will the faculty have the course emphasis be on nursing content or how to deliver that content? Will there be any attempt to teach more nontraditional types of content, such as how to instill a professional mind-set, socialize budding professional nurses, and develop a love for professional reading and writing or a hunger for continuing professional development? Will these teachers-in-training get to practice what they learn in the context of the program? Will there be discussions of how to motivate students to be active rather than passive learners or how to handle students who are not meeting standards? Will course content address the variety of learning styles likely to be present in a single group of students to accommodate both young and mature learners? Will these student-nursing instructors learn different ways to objectively evaluate student performance? And what about technology? Will these future teachers learn how to master presentation and database software, distance-learning techniques, and communicating electronically? Will these programs devote time to teaching students how to address ethics and social values in the context of the nursing role?

Writing down these questions, I realized that not only do we need more nursing instructors but we also may need a new breed of instructor—one who can keep pace with the changing times and styles of our lives. The nurses of tomorrow will come from many different “boxes.” The nursing instructors of tomorrow need to be able to anticipate and adapt to a changing type of student, an ever-evolving body of nursing knowledge, and a world of health care that will not stay static for any considerable length of time. My congratulations to those schools that are taking on the challenge of preparing tomorrow’s nursing teachers in a very directed way. I wish them and their future students Godspeed as we head off into a future with more questions than answers.