

**Current Reflections: Saudi Nurses-Social Stigma**

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Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and Lebanon by and large have sufficient numbers of nurses, but Saudi nurses constitute only 5% of the 70, 000 nurses in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Saudi nurses face a social stigma working as nurses and frequently face opposition from their families. Saudi women who want to go into nursing, but their families object, are finding ways to enter nursing without telling their families. However, families ask questions about their work, such as Umm Abdullah, a nurse in Damman, was asked by her husband to "move to a health center that only opens during the day." Working in a mixed gender environment is another objection due to "certain intimate social reasons," states Mona Al-Hagay, an obstetrician. Highly treasured among the religious and cultural values related specifically to women, are premarital chastity and fidelity within marriage. The tradition of veiling, seclusion and the strict segregation of men and women ensures the continuation of the Muslim value system. Family honor also has a significant impact on the conduct of women. A family's women represents a serious source of potential jeopardy to pride and honor of the male members, who are held ultimately responsible for the transgressions against the appropriate code of conduct for women. Saudi women cannot sign their own operative consent and two male family members must sign the OR permit for a woman to have surgery.

Socio-economic factors are beginning to break down barriers with the realization that working women can add to the family's well-being and women have become primary bread winners in some cases. The cost of living is climbing as landlords and merchants want to 'cash in' on the economic gains from oil. Food prices have increased and housing costs have gone up 20 to 30 % in 2007. Saudi Arabia was launched into the twentieth century with the drilling of oil in 1938. Since then, progress toward modernization has affected every aspect of living. In the public sector, development has focused on health, education, communications, water resources and mineral deposits.

The primary and secondary education system is not at the level of European and North American standards, but King Abdullah bin Abdullaziz al Saud, has charged the universities with elevating the standards to the level needed to achieve American accreditation. As a neighboring country's example, the American University of Beirut in 2007, received two United States 5 year accreditation for their School of Nursing.

King Abdullah is now allowing 'associations' by petition, whereas earlier years associations were not allowed. Saudi nurses are now in the process of forming the Saudi Arabian Nurses Association.

While hospitals and medical centers are attempting to achieve Magnet status recognition, Saudi nursing, as a profession, is in its infancy. Saudi Arabia has

more Saudi nurses in the Ministry of Health Hospitals because the MOH hires 2 1/2 year to 3 1/2 year Diploma graduates. Tertiary care centers hire the majority of BSN's and advanced practice nurses (APNS), but are having difficulty filling vacant positions. With the world wide nursing shortage, Saudi Arabia is less able to attract expatriate nurses due to concerns over terrorism and Middle East conflicts. King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center (KFSH & RC) in Riyadh, has only about 100 Saudi nurses and employs over 1500 nurses, many of whom are Filipino. Since the United States has placed an NCLEX center in Manila, more highly trained Filipino nurses, who previously sought positions in Saudi, are now seeking jobs in the U.S. This has placed a tremendous strain on hospital education departments as it seems necessary to basically train from the ground up in critical care, pediatric, oncology, cardiovascular, and other highly specialized nursing practice areas. KFSHRC recruiting missions are having difficulty finding nurses for pediatrics and oncology.

Hospitals are now considering 'post diploma programs' for these specialties since the current universities still do not seem to produce solid BSN/MSN programs let alone post graduate education. Recently the AORN Core Curriculum 101 Course was initiated at KFSH RC in order to have OR nurses. This will be conducted over a 12 month period for Saudi nurses. In order to maintain a flow of nurses into the workforce, many hospitals are starting their own school of nursing. KFSHRC is contemplating doing this and is affiliated with the newly developed Al Faisal University that will be linked with MIT and other US universities.

Health care in Saudi Arabia ranges from local healers to ultra modern research centers, such as KFSHRC. In 1970 there were 74 hospitals, and by 1985 there were 177 hospitals, 30, 737 hospital beds and 1,821 health centers Today this has nearly doubled, made possible because of oil revenue and the subsequent improvements in education , communication, technology advancements, urbanization, and the inevitable increase in demand for health care. The health problems in the Kingdom vary from communicable diseases such as malaria and schistosomiasis, to diseases related to stress, pollution, and automobile accidents. Environmental concerns about pollution and automobile emissions exist as there are no emission control regulations. Since the major population is under age 15, fast cars driven by young boys cause major accidents, deaths and injuries. Women are still not allowed to drive

Increase in asthma in all age groups is believed to be a result of climatic changes, pollution, and constant construction of new buildings causing dust in air along with the many sand storms carrying pollutants. Kidney disease has continuously been a major health problem due to Saudi Arabia being one of the warmest, driest climates in the world, with an average rainfall of five inches or less per year.

Certainly with these environmental concerns and increasing population, the future of health care delivery is dependent upon the development of the Saudi nursing and medical workforce. Every nurse leader in education, practice and

research, who has the opportunity to assist in developing the nursing workforce in a country other than their own, should consider how best to unify resources in order to assure all people the best nursing has to offer.

1. Arab News, Saturday, 20 October, 2007. Tash Ma Tash Episode Revives Debate on Nursing Profession.
- 2, Arab News, Wednesday, 19 December, 2007 At Mina Al-Jesser, Saudi Women Serve as Nurses and Doctors
3. Brown, Barbara J.; Nursing Administration in Saudi Arabia, pp.59 to 67; International Administration of Nursing Services , Edited by Henry, Beverly, Heyden, Richard, and Richardson, Barbara, The Charles Press, Philadelphia, 1989.
4. E-mail information from Donna J. Hilliard, RN. MBA, Program Director, Nursing Development & Saudization, KFSH & RC, 2008.