Lessons from Portugal

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“To reshape health care by integrating rehabilitation nursing concepts into care for all people.”

You should all recognize this statement as ARN’s big hairy audacious goal from our strategic plan. During a recent trip to Portugal, I was delighted to learn that their healthcare system has been using rehabilitation nursing and rehabilitation nursing concepts in all areas of care for many years.

I traveled to Portugal to be a guest speaker at the Association of Portuguese Rehabilitation Nurses’ (Associacao Portuguesa Enfermeiros de Reabilitacao [APER]) annual congress, held at a conference center in Lagoas Park, just outside of Lisbon. My topics included nurse education in the United States, the practice of rehabilitation nursing, and an overview of ARN. I also discussed rehabilitation nursing with students and faculty at one of the nursing schools in Lisbon, Escola Superior de Enfermagem de Lisboa.

According to the APER’s president, Belmiro Manuel Pereira da Rocha, the association is the oldest, largest, and most powerful specialty nursing organization in Portugal, and they attribute much of their success to ARN. Between 1963 and 1964, Portuguese nurses Sales Luís, Graça Semião, and Maria Eduarda Carmona traveled to Warm Springs, GA, where they learned about rehabilitation nursing. Maria Eduarda Carmona completed specialized rehabilitation nursing training while in Warm Springs, and then returned to Portugal where she began teaching rehabilitation nursing concepts and established the first rehabilitation nursing course in the country. Since that time the course has evolved from 34 weeks of study and practice to a 24-month post-baccalaureate course on the specialty of rehabilitation nursing. Upon completion of the baccalaureate program, nurses are granted the title of nurse, but after completing the rehabilitation program, the nurse is granted the title of rehabilitation specialist nurse.

During the 24 months of study, rehabilitation nurses become experts in providing many of the services and therapies that rehabilitation nurses in the United States typically see performed by therapists. After completing their studies, Portuguese rehabilitation nurses work in every healthcare setting, including emergency rooms, critical care units, home care, and what we would consider traditional rehabilitation units or facilities. Their responsibilities are diverse, and although their patient population may be similar to what we would expect, they also provide ventilator management, cardiopulmonary evaluation and care, and community reintegration. In short, health care in Portugal has integrated rehabilitation nursing concepts into care for all Portuguese people.

Portugal recognizes several other specialties in nursing including mental health, maternal health, obstetrics and gynecology, community and public health, family health, child and youth health, and the newest specialty—critical care. As of 2010 there were approximately 52,000 nurses in Portugal; 10,673 were specialist nurses, the vast majority of whom are rehabilitation nurses. The Portuguese government manages the healthcare program for its citizens, setting nurses’ salaries and determining the number of job opportunities that are available throughout
the country. Unfortunately, this has caused the number of Portuguese nurses, including rehabilitation specialist nurses, to drastically decrease. Efforts to address this concern include public education and inviting government officials to APER’s congress to learn about the specialty. I had the opportunity to meet Portugal’s minister of health, minister of medicine, and the director of rehabilitation services as well as Maria Augusta Sousa, the director of the National Order of Nurses (*Ordem Dos Enfermeiros*). Public education efforts included branding sugar packets with APER’s logo and the quote, “*Meya-se...pela sua qualidade de vida*” (“Move for your quality of life”); a similar message was displayed on the screens of ATM machines throughout the country.

It was a great honor to meet with the 600+ rehabilitation specialist nurses during my time in Portugal and learn that we all share many of the same joys, challenges, and opportunities as we seek to enhance the health and well-being of our patients.