

### Thorny issues: Targeted Recruitment

It is acknowledged that “affirmative action<sup>65</sup>” and purposefully seeking out members from underrepresented groups are controversial and are perceived by some as ‘reverse discrimination’ or as lowering of standards. The recommendations are based on the recognition that there are longstanding, historic and ongoing imbalances in the power and cultural makeup of the nursing workforce, particularly at the formal leadership and decision-making levels. Existing structures may be embedded with systemic biases that lead to subtle discrimination. Both research and consensus evidence indicate that targeted recruitment is an effective strategy to enhance workforce diversity.<sup>40</sup> Purposeful outreach to underrepresented groups could help diversify, enrich, and therefore strengthen nursing.

### Thorny Issues: Measuring Diversity

Talk of measuring diversity in populations as a way to reach out to under-represented groups arouse passionate responses. Concerns are often grounded in the belief that information collected will be used against these same diverse populations.

Concern that information will be misused has become a default excuse for not measuring these important variables about cultural diversity. Inadvertently, these concerns have weakened the very programs intended to reach out to under-represented groups, and in turn, to develop programs that would help such groups succeed and advance in the health care system. The reality is that much of what we “know” about the Canadian nursing workforce (beyond age, gender, education and employment status) is purely anecdotal in nature and based on shared experiences. Equity census within sectors such as health care is important, because unless this kind of information is collected, measures to develop and support a culturally diverse workforce could be inadequate based upon poor evidence. Examples of organizations who are collecting such information include the University of Toronto and, more recently, the Toronto District School Board.<sup>66</sup>

The most common misconception – so powerful that it has taken on an aura of “fact” in the minds of many people – is the notion that it is “illegal” to ask Canadians questions about their cultural demographics, such as race, religion, physical abilities or sexual orientation. So pervasive is this belief that to even raise the topic arouses significant negative opinion.

What are the facts? It is illegal for employers or universities, for example, to require that Canadians declare characteristics such as race or sexual orientation in a job application, or in an application to a school of nursing. However, it is completely within the rights of governments, employers, regulators and schools to ask if nurses or nursing students wish to voluntarily declare the way they identify themselves (or not) on a range of demographic measures. Furthermore researchers are completely free to survey samples of citizens, including nurses, and ask them if they wish to declare any identifying cultural characteristics. It must be clear to both those asking the questions and those being asked, that refusing to answer cannot carry with it an implication that doing so will in any way bias the process for a job candidate, an applicant to a school of nursing or a nurse renewing her or his registration.

This guideline therefore recommends that health care employers ask staff and schools of nursing ask students to provide demographic data on a voluntary basis. It similarly asks regulators to do the same for the larger nursing workforce and for employers to pay attention to the cultural make-up of its workforce. The purpose of soliciting, monitoring and evaluating these data is to determine more correctly the actual (not presumed) cultural make-up of the nursing profession. Knowing that information will allow the identification of gaps and weaknesses (including under-represented cultural groups), and facilitate the development of appropriate recruitment and retention strategies.