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A Cultural Dilemma

Pakistani Nursing

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Traditional values of Pakistani women create challenges for its nation's nurses.

Karachi, Pakistan—Pakistan is divided into four provinces, each with its own ethnic groups, language, style of clothing, and food. Life styles differ and are complex, influenced by the nations at its borders: China on the north, Iran on the southeast; Afghanistan on the northwest, the Arabian Sea on the south, the world's second highest mountain, K-2, on the north.

The nation was established in 1947 as an Islamic country. A major difficulty has been the low literacy rate, particularly among women. Few professions are acceptable for women to enter, such as nursing, and yet are unpopular to Pakistani society. Negative images of nurses are widespread.

Many Muslim women are denied a career in nursing due to myths and misinterpretations of pseudo religious beliefs that prevail at many levels of society. One misinterpretations is that women should observe strict "purdha," behavior that includes wearing a veil and having complete seclusion from men and being forbidden to see male strangers. But nurses provide care to everyone, regardless of ethnicity and gender, and

this is not acceptable in today's purdha system.

Therefore, the purdha system as practiced, has created a dilemma in which women are banned from a women's profession, thus decreasing access to health care for females who cannot be treated by male health care providers either.

However, Islam itself support shows little evidence of supporting such practices. Since the time of Prophet Mohammed, Peace Be Upon Him, women used to provide water and care to the injured men in the fields of battle. It was Rufaida Al-Aslamiya, the first Muslim nurse, who began nursing training for women in the 11th century (Hussain, 1981). She took her team to provide care to the injured men in war, with permission of Prophet Mohammed.

Not only this, according to Ibn-e-Saad (cited in Talib Al-Hashmi, 1981), Rufaida also provided care and health education to the people of Madina in her tent pitched in the Prophet's mosque with his complete approval. It is clear the Prophet highly supported her activities, indicating that Islam is not against women providing nursing care—in general, or

to males, specifically.

Ironically, Pakistani women as in most Muslim nations, find it acceptable to become doctors. The majority of these women doctors provide services to females and prefer working in maternity homes. Very few become surgeons and contact, or touch, patients.

A breakthrough in nursing's image came with the inception of the Aga Khan University School of Nursing in 1980. The Chancellor of the university, His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan, who is the 49th Imam or spiritual leader of the Ismaili Muslim community, encouraged women to join the nursing profession. While the preference for any health sciences university is to open a medical college, nursing was the first

priority for the Aga Khan, and the nursing school was the first program.

"My purpose is to make possible the development of your career, but you must achieve. If you fail, I have failed. If you succeed, Pakistan will be rewarded," the Aga Khan said at the school's 1981 opening. His commitment to improve the stature of nursing has brought about changes in only one decade in standards in education, practice, image, and salary benefits. In 1988, the school opened its post-RN, BScN program.

These changes in nursing education and access to higher studies, introduced an awareness of professional development, research and critical thinking in clinical practice. Now an increased demand for highly educated and skilled nurses exists throughout the nation. More Muslim women are now entering the profession and striving to improve negative images.

Despite these considerable achievements, more historical research is needed to factually describe the roles that Muslim nurses have led throughout the centuries, helping abate the myths that keep people from reaching better health (Jan, 1996). ■

AP PHOTO/B.K. BANGASH