



Nurses from the Americas region highlight the effects of COVID-19 on minority communities and healthcare workers at ICN's virtual Congress

Geneva, Switzerland, 3 November 2021 – The International Council of Nurses (ICN) Congress theme is “Nursing Around the World” and, along with the variety of international speakers, the theme is also reflected in the regional sessions which are being held each day.

Today, the voyage around the world visited the Americas with a series of videos and interviews from nurse leaders across the region.

The session started in North America with an acknowledgement of the pain and anguish that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the region, highlighting how certain groups of people, including indigenous peoples, communities of colour, the poor and healthcare workers, have suffered more than most.

In a video message The Honorable Murray Sinclair, former chair of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, said it was important to acknowledge that indigenous peoples have suffered grave injustices, and that there were many lessons that could be learned from them, not least about health and wellbeing.

Canadian nurse Michelle Danda said nurses are obliged to start conversations about racism: “Because we are on the front line, we are the direct care clinicians, we are the ones who are with people in crisis. In Canada, we have nurses from overseas – we have to say something, we can’t just be silent or wait for someone else to take the lead. We have to start noticing when our colleagues are being racially discriminated against. We have to start having those conversations about how to make it better and more socially just.”

Nurses from Latin America and the Caribbean spoke about the need for a better overall strategy to enable them to deliver improved healthcare for the people they serve, and to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. They said there are wide variations in the number of nurses per head of population across the region, and spoke of the need for governments to invest in nurse education, and to improve the working conditions of nurses. They said it was vital for governments in the region to include nurses in health policymaking decisions and to develop more nurse leaders.

Problems highlighted in the Americas region during the pandemic included a shortage of vaccines and a lack of investment in healthcare systems in the region. The terms and conditions of employment worsened in some countries and people with no professional training as nurses were employed as nurses. Nurses worked longer hours than before the pandemic, and there were shortages of crucial equipment, including personal protective equipment.

There were a number of case studies from nurses in the Americas showing how they were able to adapt to the pandemic, often because the changing situation gave them no choice. They showed how flexible nurses can be to ensure that patients get the care that they needed. And they also highlighted the pressures nurses have been under, with many nurses becoming sick with the virus, and others losing loved ones.

Ann-Marie Bridgewater from Antigua and Barbuda said her greatest challenge during the pandemic had been to help her team with their fears and anxieties while managing patients with COVID-19. Ms Bridgewater said: “I had to draw on everything I learned in nursing school and in my management training to marshal the forces, to take action. Going forward, I think that nursing will be significantly changed in terms of our approach to wearing personal protective equipment and safety.”

One American emergency room nurse, Jennifer Gil, summed up the current situation by saying: “Nurses are the eyes, ears and heart of healthcare. The COVID-19 pandemic has called on our nation and others around the world, to reinvest in our nursing and midwifery workforce. Nursing is unlike any other profession, and the world has now witnessed what we have known all along: Nurses must be valued, protected and prioritised in order to deliver high-quality healthcare and achieve health equity worldwide.”

To access recordings of the Americas regional session, and the rest of ICN Congress go to: <https://congress2021.icnevents.online/>

* * *