



The Value of Professional Governance during a National Pandemic

Phan R*

Loma Linda University Health, USA

***Corresponding author:** Rosalyn Phan, Loma Linda University Health, USA; Email: rphan0808@gmail.com

Editorial

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In the early months of 2020, the coronavirus or COVID-19 virus took the nation by storm. Fear, panic, and uncertainty were the constant day to day theme. Everything seemed to be unknown and put-on pause; this included halting all professional governance council meetings. At other hospitals in the United States, frontline nurses and interdisciplinary colleagues were concerned about what happened to professional governance and how they can continue to use their voice to implement impactful changes. This article advises on lessons learned and recommendations of how to continue a safe and productive professional governance structure during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shared governance has evolved since its inception in the 1970's. It is also referred to as professional governance, shared decision making, and an opportunity for everyone from frontline staff to leadership and interdisciplinary colleagues to have an equal opportunity to have a voice and opinion to make changes [1]. There is no perfect structure, and it is an ongoing model that is unique and different, but still has the same emphasis of partnership, equity, accountability, and ownership [2]. This model puts the authority, responsibility, and onus for practice-related decisions back to the clinical nurses who can help disseminate and support changes at the point of impact. Clinical nurses are empowered to take the lead on projects that influence patient quality, safety, and satisfaction.

COVID-19 on the Rise

In the early months of 2020, a new and novel virus emerged from Wuhan, Hubei, China [3]. It was known as the SARS-COV-2 also known as the Coronavirus or COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention officially diagnosed the first case of COVID-19 on January 21, 2020. The virus has officially impacted the United States and it was only the beginning. After a couple of months of

uncertainty and continuous cases of infected civilians, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic in March 2020. Hospitals and skilled nursing facilities reached alarming surges and not enough capacity and resources to meet the growing need. COVID-19 surges impacted states at a different rate, but one thing remains the same; hospitals are prioritizing personal protective equipment (PPE), equipment such as additional beds and ventilators, and managing staffing [4].

With so much unknown it seemed like the last thing to worry about and prioritize was professional governance. Hospitals decided to postpone and cancel professional governance meetings until further notice. These meetings were deemed as unnecessary and nonessential during the pandemic, yet key decisions are being made and the results directly affect the structure, process, and outcomes of patient care, satisfaction, and employee health and wellbeing. Now more than ever, the voices of clinical nurses had an opportunity to shine at it is brightest in the darkest of times. Professional Governance provides nurses an equal opportunity to take part in shared decision making and now more than ever is the time clinical nurses need to feel empowered to make a change [5].

Foundations of Professional Governance

In order to continue to remind and engage clinical staff, there were individualized unit training and orientation for new members who may be filling in or just joined the council. In order for professional governance to thrive everyone has a role and a responsibility. Virtual training was provided for leadership and clinical staff. This training provided an opportunity to engage, excite, and support clinical staff to continue their hard efforts and focus on key priorities. Topics that were included in the training consisted of the nursing strategic plan, standardized templates such as meeting minutes

and agendas, evidence-based practice tools, and resources. Frequent communication and prioritization of professional governance councils continues to strengthen a culture of collaboration, innovation, and quality of care.

Safety and Engagement through Virtual Professional Governance Meetings

Prior to the pandemic, there have been discussions of how to engage clinical staff from day shifts and night shifts to join the unit based professional governance councils. Barriers such as timing, meeting location, and parking have all been common challenges that deter clinical nurses from attending monthly meetings on a regular basis. With these obstacles, it is understandable for healthcare organizations to postpone and cancel meetings until further notice and focus on the growing day to day changes of the pandemic. However, one thing remains crucial, the practice environment will continually change and the need for input from those who are directly impacted is essential.

In order to provide the resources and opportunities for staff to continue to be engaged and involved, the support for virtual meeting platforms was the answer. After working with the information technology department, specific guidelines and rules were set forth to ensure that staff were still able to participate in a virtual capacity while maintain standards and guidelines. Some examples include not sharing any patient health information during the meeting, staff visible on camera and engaged from the start of the meeting to the end and using an approved platform that is deemed safe and appropriate by the information technology department. The education and awareness of using virtual platforms for all professional governance meetings was something novel and new, but the safety and wellbeing of the clinical staff was of utmost importance. Clinical staff shared that they felt supported, engaged, and thankful to leverage technology during these difficult times and that they had an equal opportunity to express their concerns and action plans for improvement. Although, COVID-19 may have dampened a lot of things, the spirit of inquiry, empowerment, and

engagement continues to prosper through professional governance councils.

Summary

During the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic professional governance was an essential model that supported the continuous growth and development of clinical nurses during the COVID-19 crisis. The continuation of professional governance yielded hope and engagement from clinical nurses and interprofessional colleagues. The ability to still make impactful changes through shared decision making and positive outcomes was a driving force in nurse satisfaction and quality patient care. The steadfast commitment of key stakeholders to ensure that technology advancements and support was in place made the difference in staff participation and commitment. Regardless of changes and challenges, the importance of maintaining a culture of shared decision making through professional governance should be a continuous priority.

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