

Teaching nurses the skills of empathy

A nurse from Timaru wants to help nurses reclaim the values of empathy, compassion and connectedness.

By co-editor Anne Manchester

The way nurses speak and relate to patients can have a positive or negative influence on their health trajectory, says Timaru registered nurse and internationally certified integrative nurse coach Anah Aikman.

Aikman is dedicated to restoring a values-base to nursing practice and leadership, and to teaching empathy, compassion and connectedness within nursing for the benefit of communities.

At the end of October, she organised a one-day health and wellness workshop in Christchurch, *Changing Lenses*, with two overseas keynote speakers and three from New Zealand. Although numbers were small – 20 attended, most of whom were nurses – Aikman believes each one will be the pioneers of change in their own spheres of influence.

“I have nursed for more than 40 years and I can see how nurses are in danger of losing their empathetic skills. It’s so hard for them to find quiet time to spend just listening to their patients. We need to look at our own lives through new lenses, and learn to listen to people’s stories empathetically and without judgement.”

Aikman, who has both Māori and Scottish ancestry, became the first certified integrative nurse coach outside the United States in 2013. She has been heartened recently to hear Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and other government ministers talk about using a “well-being measure” to assess the impact of government policies on people’s health.

“We have some frightening statistics in this country, particularly around mental health and suicide rates. Health professionals could turn some of these things around, if we developed trusting relationships with our patients from our



Three of the speakers at the *Changing Lenses* workshop in Christchurch, from left, Summer Damuth, Carolyn Jones and Anah Aikman.

earliest contact with them. It’s when people feel they are not heard that stress builds up and this, in turn, can lead to long-term illness.”

Changing Lenses: The role of empathy, culture and kindness for healthy communities was an experiential event, Aikman said. As participants arrived, they were welcomed with a creative ambience using live music and visual stimulation. “Creativity within a safe nurturing environment is the key to how we learn,” she said.

Nurses’ unique power to heal was the theme addressed by New York-based filmmaker and photographic ethnographer Carolyn Jones. Inspired by a personal experience in which a nurse helped her through chemotherapy, Jones has spent the past seven years interviewing more than 150 nurses. From this she has created a book and a film called *The American Nurse*, in an effort to better understand the integral role nurses play in our lives. Her latest feature-length documentary, *Defining Hope*, tells the story of patients with life-threatening illnesses, and the nurses who share their journey.

Author of the award-winning book, *Super Power Baby Project*, Rachel Callander, spoke about the need to communicate using open-hearted language. Three perspectives were important, she said – when nurses were caring for others, for their colleagues and for themselves. Callander also addressed the NZNO conference in September.

Senior medical officer at South Can-

terbury District Health Board Summer Damuth gained a doctorate in osteopathic medicine in the United States. Osteopathy, she said, centered on treating the patient as a whole – mind, body and spirit. This focus led her to understand how the body is capable of self-regulation, self-healing and health maintenance. “Understanding people’s own experience is

exactly what health professionals should be striving to do,” she said. “Empathy is a skill that can be taught, a skill that everyone in health care can and should be striving to improve upon with each patient they encounter. This should occur even in the busy emergency department such as where I work.”

Integrative nurse coach Heather Leong, a community nurse in the Waikato working with clients with disabilities and other life-limiting illnesses, spoke about how she supports people to find their own path to improved and optimal well-being.

Otago mental health nurse Elizabeth Cook, a board-certified holistic nurse, offers holistic health services individualised to each client. Both Leong and Cook shared their journeys on the road to well communities.

Aikman’s determination to transform nursing cultures will continue next February with a radio series broadcast on Plains FM Radio in Christchurch. Called *Changing Lenses*, the series will be a behind-the-scenes look at what makes a nurse a healer. She is also planning a *Changing Lenses* roadshow to travel nationally during 2019. Go to www.anahaikman.com for further information. •

• The New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine is running a “first-ever compassion in healthcare conference” in Auckland in March next year. See <http://compassioninhealth> for more information. •