

# "Voice of the profession:" Nurse editors as leaders

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**Nurse editors lead the nursing profession by shaping the literature on which practice is based. This qualitative descriptive study was designed to explore nurse editors' perceptions of the most important aspects of their role and its best and worst qualities. An email survey was returned by 88 editors of 90 journals. Responses to 3 open-ended questions were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The most commonly cited important aspects of the editor role were to maintain scientific and editorial quality and provide vision and direction. The most commonly noted benefits were helping nurses become authors and influencing nursing knowledge and practice. The worst aspects were constant demands on their time and the scarcity of good writing. These nurse editors' goals of moving the profession forward through mentoring are congruent with contemporary theories of leadership. Employer support for both editors and writers would enhance the production of published evidence and reduce the burdens on editors.**

The body of scientific and clinical evidence on which nursing practice is based is showcased and secured in the journals of the profession. The periodicals in which nurses communicate their clinical and research discoveries are second only to conference abstracts in their timeliness, and they improve on conference proceedings in their widespread availability and the revision and refinement achieved during review and pre-publication editing. Nursing journals provide a venue for expression of current ideas, a lasting record of past practices and discoveries, and an essential resource for education of nurses of the future. Nursing journal editors are the collectors and curators of this nursing

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knowledge. The importance of nurse editors as leaders was noted in 1997 by veteran editor Suzanne Smith Blancett,<sup>1</sup> who catalogued the functional aspects of the editor role and her increasing awareness of the importance of editorial leadership.

According to Tomey, a leader focuses on change, the future, purposes and goals, and maximizing human potential, while managers focus on continuity, structures and procedures, and maximizing human performance.<sup>2</sup> Nurse editors' editorials are the main source of information about editors' views on their role, and these writings suggest an awareness of both leader and manager functions. Some entries convey the editor's sense of responsibility to guide the profession, as seen in Broome's recent comments in this journal.<sup>3</sup> Other editorials, including another by Broome,<sup>4</sup> explain the journal's goals, practices, and track record. How do nurse editors as a group describe their roles and the purpose of their activities? What are their most common satisfactions or frustrations? We explored these questions in the analysis presented here.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

The data analyzed for this article were collected as a part of a larger descriptive study of nurse editors, the background and methods of which have been described more completely elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Because of our interest in the experiences of nurses taking on the editorial role, the sample excluded non-nurse editors of nursing publications. IRB approval was obtained for this email survey. Ninety surveys were returned from 88 editors (2 editors were editors for 2 journals, providing separate responses on their practices at each journal). The respondents represented 78 self-designated scholarly journals and 12 other types of nursing publications, including newsletters and magazines. Nineteen were published outside the United States, and 71 were US publications. Of the 90 journals, 52 were official journals of professional associations.

The complete survey had 108 questions, including demographic data about the editors and their journals, their review and editorial boards, practices and procedures, and how they made their editorial decisions. Editors' responses to these questions are described elsewhere.<sup>5-7</sup> The results presented here are based on analysis of responses to 3 open-ended questions at the end of the long survey:

1. Please list the most important things the editor does for the journal.
2. What is the best part of being a nurse editor?
3. What is the worst part of being a nurse editor?

## DATA ANALYSIS

Text data were obtained in electronic form from the email surveys and de-identified before analysis. Of the 88 respondents, 85 chose to respond to question 1, 83 to question 2, and 80 to question 3. Editors made from 1–8 comments in response to each item, yielding 216 text units for question 1, 132 for question 2, and 107 for question 3. Content analysis was used to categorize and label the responses,<sup>8</sup> and the frequency of responses in each category was tabulated to reflect the proportion of respondents voicing each sentiment.<sup>9</sup> Each author independently coded the responses and agreed on the final assignment to categories. The content within each category was summarized descriptively with the goal of low-inference interpretation that adhered to the expressed views and vocabulary of respondents.<sup>10</sup> There were no apparent differences between the responses from editors based in the US and those in other countries, or between editors of official association journals and other journals. No member-checking of the email sample was attempted. Attendees at a presentation of the findings at a nurse editors' conference expressed their agreement with the overall findings.

## RESULTS

### *Most Important Editor Activities*

**Maintaining quality.** The things an editor does for a journal that were most frequently cited as important were related to setting a direction and standards, developing individuals' potential as contributors, and strengthening the profession. The full list of response categories and frequencies is presented in Table 1. Viewed as a whole, 9 of the 14 categories of important functions focused on leading, and 5 were related to managing.

Editors reported that the most important aspects of the role were to maintain the journal's scientific and editorial quality and integrity, and to provide role modeling, vision, and direction to the journal and to its readers. Upholding quality, integrity, or accuracy was specifically noted by 40 of the 85 respondents. Three editors used identical terminology: "sets the standards for quality." The verbs across the responses reflected editors' sense of responsibility for the final product: "maintains," "insures," "monitors," "sets," "sustains." When quality was defined, language included "scientifically sound," "accurate," "clinical merit," "evidence-based," "useful," "balanced and honest," and "well-written."

**Providing vision and leadership.** Editors also saw themselves as providing leadership, both to the editorial team and to the clinicians who would eventually benefit

**Table 1.** Most important things an editor does for a journal (n = 85)

Category	n	%
Maintain journal's integrity and quality of content and writing	42	49
Provide vision, leadership, and direction to journal and readers	31	36
Mentor and support authors and reviewers	23	27
Keep content clinically current and relevant	20	24
Promote development of nursing knowledge and practice	20	24
Be responsive to needs of readers	13	15
Solicit good articles	13	15
Set the style and tone of the journal	10	12
Maintain good relations with authors, editorial board, publisher, association	10	12
Keep the journal and review process going and on-time	9	11
Insure fair, ethical, effective review process	8	9
Promote the journal	8	9
Keeping up with field and competition	5	6
Recruit strong reviewers and board	4	5

from the journal's content. One editor simply responded that the editor "is the voice of the profession." Within the 30 responses in this category, broad actions, such as "be a visionary leader," "plans for the future of the journal," "develops a vision, looks for new paths for readers to explore," and "serves as role model and inspiration for the nursing specialty" were noted more frequently (n = 27) than practical decisions such as "chooses which topics to focus on" (n = 3).

**Mentoring and coaching.** In the next most common categories, supporting and coaching writers and reviewers were emphasized. The expression "mentoring new authors" was frequently applied. Insuring currency of content was also important, and responses such as "make sure we are on top of issues that are important to nurses" and "stay on top of the profession in terms of what is going on" reflected a goal of timeliness and relevance. The same number of editors viewed their role as advancing nursing scholarship and practice. "Serving as a guide to practice," "growing nursing practice," and "shape the dissemination of information to the discipline" were typical reports.

The managerial and mechanical functions of editing were less often mentioned, and the goal of quality also was reflected within many of these responses. Of the 13 editors who mentioned the managerial function of soliciting articles, 5 emphasized "the best" or "quality"

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