Could you begin by briefly discussing your background and how you became interested in the working conditions of nurses in Central America?

I have been travelling to El Salvador since 1991 and performing research there since 1993. In the past, I focused on the social changes arising from land reform and healthcare restructuring. The latter included a remarkable social movement to resist privatization of the Salvadorean healthcare system, which was unprecedented in its breadth, duration and success. I was, however, struck by the absence of nurses’ voices in that healthcare struggle, and I wanted to understand more about the extent and forms of Central American nurses’ labour militancy.

Additionally, about 30 years ago, when graduating from high school, I toyed with the idea of becoming a nurse myself. I even completed the first year of studies in a Bachelor of Science nursing programme. So, in a sense, through my research life, I’ve come full circle.

Your latest work focuses on how healthcare policies in El Salvador and Nicaragua over the past 25 years have affected nurses’ wellbeing and contributions to healthcare. Could you provide a brief overview of this research and its main objectives?

The research aims to shed light on how the neoliberal healthcare policies implemented in these two countries since the 1990s have affected nurses’ workload, status, remuneration, stress levels, etc. While some literature considering the impacts of neoliberal reforms on patients, labourers and consumers already existed, almost nothing had been written in either Spanish or English about nurses’ working conditions in Central America.

At roughly the same time, both countries experienced an electoral shift away from conservative rule to government by former revolutionary leftists, who were avowing rejection of neoliberalism in social services. My research project was an opportunity to investigate the extent of that policy swing, and identify changes it may have brought to nurses’ work situations. Finally, another goal of the project is to simply draw attention to the positive contributions Salvadorean and Nicaraguan nurses make to the health of their societies.

You recently wrote a book entitled What Nurses Do: A Glimpse of Their Work in El Salvador’s Public Health-care System. What was the motivation behind this work?

In part, I wanted to enhance the validity of the project’s findings by utilizing multiple forms of data collection. I had carried out in-depth interviews and focus groups in the first phases of the project, but had not yet spent much time observing what the nurses do, so I decided to incorporate the shadowing of nurses in several different public sector facilities. I also wanted a way of presenting research findings that would enhance their reach and accessibility beyond the typical readership of academic journals.

To showcase nurses’ contributions to healthcare, the e-book incorporates images of them performing a variety of direct and indirect caregiving tasks. I chose to focus the e-book only on El Salvador because it had embarked on an ambitious healthcare reform in 2010. The photography was entirely the work of Jim Gronau, while the book’s graphic design and layout was masterfully done by Aleks Phoenix Correa. Thanks to translator Hernán Sicilia I was able to produce a second version of the book in a very polished and professional level of Spanish.

What is the next step for this research?

I would like to boost the e-book’s circulation and, alongside local nursing advocates, to co-present the policy-relevant aspects of the findings directly to Health Ministry officials and key policy makers. I see great possibilities for this in El Salvador, where the government has been very transparent about its new healthcare policies and their outcomes, and seems open to constructive dialogue.
Neoliberal healthcare policy in Central America

A researcher at the University of Guelph in Canada investigates how changes to the healthcare systems of El Salvador and Nicaragua affect nurses and outlines a path to improvement.

Nurses play an incredibly important role in the healthcare system. Their wide-ranging expertise and ongoing contact with patients enable them to quickly identify any issues that may arise, as well as offer emotional support to patients and their families. Changes in healthcare policies often have a direct influence on the working conditions of nurses, potentially impacting their wellbeing and, in turn, their ability to care for their patients.

Dr Lisa Kowalchuk from the University of Guelph, Canada, has spent several years researching the impacts that changes to healthcare in Central America have on nurses in the region. Focusing on El Salvador and Nicaragua, Kowalchuk’s work highlights the essential contributions that nurses provide in these countries, and how policies since the 1990s have affected their working lives. Her research is also important for gender equality discussions in the region, as the vast majority of nurses there are female.

The burden of policy change

Both El Salvador and Nicaragua have undergone two major shifts in healthcare policy, implementing spending cuts and privatisations starting in the 1990s, and more recently halting those neoliberal measures in favour of promised expansion of the public healthcare system. Kowalchuk’s research, which includes observation, focus groups and in-depth interviews with nurses, has revealed the strain that they are under, particularly in Nicaragua where neoliberal restructuring means working with fewer resources and increased patient numbers. “Nurses in Nicaragua are the lowest paid in Latin America,” Kowalchuk reveals. “They face high work stress due to a combination of increased patient demand on the system, a lack of any commensurate enhancement of nurse staffing levels, and patients’ growing sense of entitlement, which often manifests as formal complaints that the Government actually encourages.”

Many of Kowalchuk’s interviewees in Nicaragua reported demeaning and abusive treatment from patients, even in the midst of trying to help them. Kowalchuk’s discussions with nurses also revealed many feel religiously called to healthcare. However, this self-sacrificing devotion means their government employers can overwork them without objection.

In El Salvador, full-time nursing positions in the public healthcare sector were greatly reduced around 15 years ago, leading to a deluge of temporary and part-time contract work. This was further exacerbated by an oversupply of labour from a growing number of students in nursing degrees, many of whom cannot find employment upon graduation and are forced to emigrate. Since 2009, the Salvadoran Government has been reinvesting in public healthcare, including more full-time nursing positions, but so far nurse-patient ratios have not improved.

Taking action

Another Central American country, Honduras, has seen nurses rise up both as opponents of political repression and as advocates for their patients. Kowalchuk emphasises that this social mobilisation has not been seen in Nicaragua and El Salvador. However, she hopes to see nurses build a stronger labour organisation to demand better working conditions. “In order for more nurses to see collective action as legitimate and compatible with their strong ethos of service, association leaders need to cultivate awareness among both their members and the general public of how nurses’ wellbeing is entwined with that of their patients,” Kowalchuk elaborates.

Kowalchuk’s research points to the need for the governments of both El Salvador and Nicaragua to increase permanent nursing positions. “Going forward, both governments need to be more responsive to nurse managers’ reporting on staffing needs,” explains Kowalchuk. “Otherwise, it is only logical to predict rising incidence of morbidity and mortality that results from inattention or negligence.”

Kowalchuk also hopes that her work will positively affect how nurses are valued in these two countries. Her findings pinpoint the achievements made by nurses despite the challenging circumstances imposed on them. “Salvadoran and Nicaraguan nurses could achieve so much more for these countries’ populations if they worked with more reasonable staffing levels, rest periods, equipment, medicines and other supplies, as well as recognition for their often specialised knowledge,” Kowalchuk concludes.

What Nurses Do: A Glimpse of Their Work in El Salvador’s Public Health-care System

To read Dr Lisa Kowalchuk’s e-book, please visit: www.nursesworkincentralamerica.com

Impact of shifting healthcare policies on nurses

Objectives

- To illuminate how the dramatic shifts in healthcare policies in El Salvador and Nicaragua over the past 25 years have affected nurses’ wellbeing and capacity to exercise their skills
- To increase the visibility of nurses’ contributions to healthcare

Funding

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)

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Lisa Kowalchuk is a sociologist at the University of Guelph who has been conducting research in El Salvador for over two decades on topics that include Canadian development assistance, land reform, peasant protest, and healthcare restructuring. Her most recent project, funded by SSHRC, compares the labour conditions of nurses in El Salvador and Nicaragua.