How Much Diversity in Nursing Is Enough?

If we’re afraid to even talk about such questions, we’re not there yet.

At a recent leadership conference focused on building inclusive environments in health care, one of the keynote speakers raised the question: “How much diversity is enough?” Initially, I was surprised that in a room of over 100 nurse leaders, no one stood up to offer a response. The next day the question was raised again. As I looked around the room, I wondered how many people, like me, remained silent because they were afraid to discuss such a sensitive topic.

Health care institutions are being asked to increase the ethnic and racial diversity of health care providers. In 2004, an Institute of Medicine report, *In the Nation’s Compelling Interest: Ensuring Diversity in the Health Care Workforce*, emphasized the need for greater diversity among health care providers. It has been argued that increasing diversity in the health care workforce could help to eliminate health care disparities and strengthen overall cultural competence. For example, a more diverse workforce would be better equipped to provide patient-centered care to an increasingly diverse population.

Unfortunately, some minority groups remain starkly underrepresented in nursing. A 2013 survey published by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing revealed that African American, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander nurses make up 11% of the nursing workforce. However, these minority groups constitute more than one-third of the U.S. population.

Numerous organizations have called on nursing schools to step up efforts to strengthen diversity. But the question remains: just how much diversity is enough? When will institutions know they have achieved diversity? As institutions attempt to achieve greater ethnic and racial diversity, differences in thoughts and ideas are likely to emerge. For example, some have argued that there’s no target number for diversity, while others say it should reflect the population being served. Will people feel safe to discuss issues related to diversity, such as whether an individual received a position because of talent or ethnicity, or whether diversity is ever used to discriminate against the majority population?

When the question “how much diversity is enough?” was raised, I hesitated to stand. There weren’t too many people in the audience who looked like me, so I worried that my response wouldn’t be well received. Nevertheless, though my knees were shaking, I finally mustered the courage to rise and respond to the question. First, I asked the audience to think about how they would have replied if the speaker had asked, “How much money is enough?” I shared several plausible responses and saw people nodding in agreement. I then asked why no one had responded to the diversity question. Silence. Were they as afraid as I was? After all, I’d assumed that my views on diversity wouldn’t be well received. That was when I noticed my sympathetic nervous system kick in.

I told my colleagues that if I were at a conference with many other minority nurses, I would have readily responded. I would have felt more confident to speak to people who looked like me and possibly shared similar experiences. I wouldn’t have worried that my comments—for example, “diversity alone isn’t enough to end health care disparities; we need inclusive environments that support diversity initiatives”—might have sparked a heated debate.

But being a minority at a meeting of mostly white people gave me pause. I ended by saying, in a trembling voice, “I would know that there was enough diversity when racial and ethnic minorities felt safe to share their opinions about diversity in large settings—when diversity was such a normal occurrence that we would not have to ask how much diversity was enough.”

As our institutions strive to become more diverse, administrators will have to learn how to create safe environments where opinions on race and ethnicity are encouraged and valued. Only then can we engage in meaningful conversations that help to resolve the systemic issues surrounding diversity and make greater strides in ending health care disparities.

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