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Speech by Mr. James Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
delivered to the
Zimbabwe Nurses' Association (ZINA)

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SPEECH FOR MR. JAMES GRANT, UNICEF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
TO BE DELIVERED TO THE
ZIMBABWE NURSES' ASSOCIATION (ZINA)
ON THE OCCASION OF INTERNATIONAL NURSES' DAY
- 12 May 1986 -

In the global campaign to provide a decent level of health, a basic right of all people, a major resource has been badly neglected: the 4 million strong nursing profession.

Nurses have been frequently ignored or looked down upon, maintained in their traditionally subordinate role, and systematically excluded from decision-making and community involvement.

Several years ago, a WHO experts' meeting on Nurses' contribution to the goal of "Health For All By The Year 2000," pointed out that "most countries have not involved nurses in the critical decision-making necessary for effective health care planning and health manpower development. As a consequence, many major decisions concerning nurses are made by people - usually physicians - without the benefit of the nurse's input".

However, millions of nurses throughout the world hold an important key to the acceptance and expansion of primary health care because they work closely with many people at all levels of society.

One important and positive influence on the image of nurses and nursing is the changing role of women throughout the world.

In the past we have seen a traditional view of nursing as a vocation, a kind of divine, calling for kind-hearted ladies.

But as Ms Constance Holleran, Executive Director of the International Council of Nurses (ICN) emphasises "as educated professionals, responsible for the well-being of their patients, nurses have to modify their customary image in all areas of their competence and in all health care situations".

Stereotypes die hard, but as nurses assume their new, equal and policy-making role in health care, their image is bound to change.

More of you are moving from the hospital to the everyday life of the community where you are badly needed. Nurses, predicts Dr Mahler, Director General of the World Health Organisation, "will become resources to people rather than resources to physicians."

Nurses must become more active in educating people on health matters. Nurse leaders must become increasingly innovative and participate in programme planning, implementation and evaluation. More and more nurses are becoming leaders and managers of primary health teams.

If the millions of nurses were to articulate their ideas and convictions about primary health care, and come together as one force, then they could act as a powerhouse for change!

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Today is being celebrated as International Nurses' Day and this year, nurses all over the world have planned their "Nurses Day" activities around the theme "Universal Child Immunization By 1990".

Why immunization?

For decades, nurses in all countries have been at the fore-front of national efforts to eliminate the six major preventable diseases that still claim the lives of millions of children.

In many villages and towns, there are children who cannot walk. These children have to sit in the yard all day long, or stagger around supported by a stick or crutch. These children have been crippled by POLIO.

In these same villages and towns, there are people who cough blood, and are always weak and thin. Sometimes they die. They have TUBERCULOSIS.

Still other children in our villages and towns develop heavy and prolonged coughs which may lead to death through pneumonia and malnutrition - they suffer from WHOOPING COUGH.

We cannot forget about MEASLES which weakens our children and can lead to other conditions such as diarrhoea and pneumonia resulting in blindness or even death.

Nor can we forget TETANUS caused by infections at the time of birth when the umbilical cord is cut using unclean razor blades or when cow dung is applied to the stump.

Finally, DIPHTHERIA results in our children having bad throat infections, which can affect their hearts or brains, and often leads to death.

But as we all know these weak or disabled children could have been running and playing like all the other children if only their parents had taken them for IMMUNIZATION.

As you nurses are all too aware, in many instances, we have not had the logistical and material support necessary to reach even half of the children needing to be immunized each year.

But, the situation is now changing radically. In response to a resolution unanimously adopted by the UNICEF Executive Board in April 1985, the UN Secretary General has called upon national authorities to use the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the United Nations to reaffirm their commitment to the goal of achieving universal immunization of young children by 1990, through accelerated action in line with the goal already established by the World Health Assembly for the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI). This effort is important in itself, but it can also lend momentum to other primary health care approaches supported by WHO and UNICEF.

The aim, however, is to go far beyond resolutions and official statements, towards mobilizing the human and financial resources needed to make this goal a reality by 1990.

UNICEF Offices in all parts of the world are working with Governments and non-Governmental organizations alike in massive fund-raising and public awareness efforts in order to harness the necessary political will and financial commitments that an immunization programme of this size will need.

In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Health through the Zimbabwe Expanded Programme on Immunization (ZEPI) has made great progress toward reaching this goal, and all of you can share in this pride.

This week, being "Immunization Awareness Week" is proof of Zimbabwe's ongoing commitment. And this is a unique opportunity for nurses to take the lead on an issue that is of direct relevance to them as professionals.

"The life duration of babies is the most delicate test of health conditions", said one of the most renowned nurses, Miss Florence Nightingale. 1820

Almost a century ago in 1894 Miss Nightingale also said "preventable diseases should be looked upon as a social crime".

With the millions of nurses around the world raising their voices today in support of the 1990 immunization target, the impact in fighting this social crime may have far reaching positive effects for years to come!

We count on your continuing active support.

Thank you.

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