

John A. Carranza // Coronavirus, or COVID-19, has disrupted daily life for people around the world as medical experts, scientists, and nations rush to halt the spread of this virus. In the United States, Americans have put their lives on hold to practice social distancing and quarantine when infected. Grocery store employees, delivery service workers, and janitorial staff have assumed the primary, and risky, roles of keeping society operating. Medical professionals, such as nurses, have also been key to addressing the pandemic. In fact, for World Health Day 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized the work of nurses and midwives on the frontlines of the pandemic response “providing high quality, respectful treatment and care, leading community dialogue...and, in some instances, collecting data for clinical studies.” Nurses bring a unique sense of expertise and compassion to the healthcare space.

On April 7, 2020, CNN reported a brief coronavirus update—a semi-permanent fixture on its homepage—about a nurse named Juliana Morawski who came out of retirement to offer her assistance in the pandemic. Morawski told the reporter, “I’ve never seen emergency departments or nursing or any of the services...under so much threat. And it’s a family. So when family is threatened, you try to step up as much as you can.” Morawski’s dedication and service to the sick are characteristics of the nursing profession. Furthermore, caring as a critical component of nursing has also been one of the features of the profession that evolved and was taught in nursing school curricula throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s (Malka 128-131). These attributes were last brought into stark relief during the early years of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, where nurses offered a complete plan of care and engaged in discussions about the goals of their profession when stigma was attached to AIDS patients (McGarrahan 6-7).

The role of nurses in providing care and education during the coronavirus pandemic highlights what the anthropologist Victor Turner calls a social drama. For Turner, the manifestation of a social drama always highlights the divisions within society that are brought to a head when a crisis occurs. The crisis is resolved when the parties seek some form of redress that allow for the evaluation of society as a whole (Turner 10-11). Coronavirus has provided the crucial venue for this particular social drama to play out.

Where Americans seek leadership and reassurance, they find a government that is fractured and frequently at odds with other agencies. For example, President Trump (who has no medical credentials or education in public health) has advocated for the use of hydroxychloroquine, an unproven anti-malaria medication, over the objections of Dr. Anthony Fauci, who has been the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases for more than thirty five years.

Where health insurance is tied to employment, many poorer Americans, especially those of racial minority groups, will be affected as they lose their jobs in large numbers and will not have access to crucial medical care. Along with a shortage in ventilators, is a shortage of respiratory therapists and medications used to sedate patients. However, in the face of instability, the one constant source of reassurance is the strength and trust in medical professionals such as nurses. Americans of all political stripes can look at the face of a nurse whose personal protective equipment has left deep purple bruises, and sympathize. These are the same people who might share in the pain of being unable to hug their children after a long day at work for fear of passing infection. The ability to empathize with healthcare workers is crucial for the steps that follow the peak of the epidemic.

The United States has yet to experience the worst of coronavirus infections within its borders, but there is no doubt that it will come to shape the future of the country. Rebecca L. Spang has reasoned that change in society is already underway and being ushered along by the pandemic itself. Those in positions to make the most of societal redress are nurses and other medical professionals on the frontlines of the fight against coronavirus by calling for improved healthcare and more cohesive plans in addressing future pandemics.

Works Cited

Malka, Susan Gelfand. *Daring to Care: American Nursing and Second-Wave Feminism*. University of Illinois Press, 2007.

McGarrahan, Peggy. *Transcending AIDS: Nurses and HIV Patients in New York City*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994.

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For a more complete history of the early years of nursing in America, see:

Reverby, Susan. *Ordered to Care: The Dilemma of American Nursing, 1850-1945*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.