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### **The Importance of the Ontario Nurses' Association for Nurses (ONA)**

As a new Public Health graduate, during the Covid-19 pandemic I sought out different areas in public health that I could be of assistance to frontline staff to alleviate the burden caused by the virus. I gained an immense amount of valuable experience working in hospitals and long-term care facilities, and to my surprise, quickly learned that nursing was indeed where my passion within public health lies. Part of this discovery arose from patients often telling me that I would make a wonderful nurse, and the other came from the inspiration of my father, who is a nurse and also a member of the Ontario Nurses Association (ONA).

The ONA, is comprised of more than 68,000 professional members of a union and is affiliated with over 18,000 nursing students active throughout Ontario (Ontario Nurses Association, 2022). The ONA works to provide both expertise and support to various registered nurses, students, and health care professionals working in hospitals, nursing homes, home care, communities, public health, clinics, industry settings, family health teams, and community health centres (Ontario Nurses Association, 2022). The association seeks to offer programs, educational opportunities, and services for its affiliates and members in an environment which promotes inclusivity, integrity, equity, fairness, and professionalism in the workplace (ONA, 2021, p. 1).

These services include but are not limited to, continuing education and certification programs, supportive learning opportunities for students paired with registered nurses, protection from workplace harassment and discrimination, and regulating the contractual relationship through negotiations between employees and employers to offer its members better conditions of employment [E.g., salary, health & safety benefits, pension, and probationary period advantages] (ONA, 2022, p. 2). The ONA also strives to improve the overall perception and image of how

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nurses are depicted in the media and portrayed to the public, whether it be to (a) actively correct prior misconceptions held about the nursing profession, (b) promote nursing as a lucrative career path for present and future aspiring nurses, or (c) empower nurses & health care professionals to speak up and integrate their collective voice into the decision making process of the government's public policy development (ONA, 2020, p. 2).

Despite the challenges faced through Covid-19, nurse practitioners, health care professionals, and aspiring nursing students have endeavoured to work tirelessly, better educating themselves, and strengthening their resolve to give back to the communities in which they work and live. However, with the rising costs of living, economic inflation, and increasing demand for well-equipped and knowledgeable nurses, it seems unfair to require so much more of nurses and health care professionals whilst enforcing legislation that "limits wage increases to a maximum of 1% total compensation for three years" (ONA, 2022).

Addressing the increasing concern surrounding the implementation of Bill 124, the ONA has been working tirelessly to have the voice of nurses, students, and other health care professionals heard. Whether it be through public petition and communication, social and news media, or various other means, the ONA continues to understand the importance of advocating for the repeal and correction of this legislation, which seeks to normalize inherent wage disparity, gender discrimination and limits the association's right to bargain fairly and equitably for its members (ONA, 2022).

As a member of the BIPOC community, I appreciate the progress being made within the ONA to increase member visibility, representation, and the equitability of employment opportunities for persons of colour within the workplace (ONA, 2021, p 14). These actions are a

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constant reminder for present and future nursing students that personal progress garnered through practical experience and education can lead to increased opportunities in leadership roles, training, and influence within the nursing field.

In response to virtual Covid-19 restrictions, the ONA has provided nursing students with access to safe in-person clinical placements, where they are equipped with proper PPE, oriented in the correct responsibilities and protocols required - particularly when dealing with an infectious patient, and have access to accommodations which suit their individual needs (i.e., financial assistance, reassignment, sick day options). This is crucial when caring for patients, as these protective barriers ensure not only the safety of nursing students and staff, but also continuously protect the health of patients and the public alike. During one of my clinicals, it was the infection control gear and safety protocols that made having patient family conversations much smoother while navigating through their loved one's last few moments.

Furthermore, the ONA offers nursing students like myself the opportunity to register for free digital workshops communicated via zoom which provide educational insights on a variety of topics such as diversity, leadership, dealing with incidents, harassment, and health & safety hazards in the workplace.

Many students, registered nurses, and health care professionals are still feeling the direct impacts of Covid-19 in a tremendous way. That is why the ease of access to ONA's mental health support services is so important, as they help aid anxiety & stress relief, provide tools to sustainably balance work and personal demands, and offer access to resources that ease the financial/ physical/ emotional and mental strains being experienced by each individual, improving their overall wellbeing.

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As an aspiring registered nurse, the preservation of mental health has never been more significant, as we are directly affected by and directly affect the overall health and wellbeing of our communities and Ontario as a whole. With the help and support of the ONA, members can fully utilize their talents and abilities to their greatest extent, providing excellent patient care, maintaining a healthy work-life balance, and collectively thriving in their own workplaces. With the continued support of the ONA for students, I feel protected by the challenges the nursing profession faces, yet also assured that through my rigorous studies, I too can become the exceptional nurse my parents have been and the wonderful nurse my patients see me to be.

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