SURVEY SAYS: 
NURSES’ INFLUENCE 
on Health Care 
is Untapped

By J. Cunningham, Texas Nursing Staff

Gallup® polls usually reflect the public’s opinion. They have for more than 70 years been a standard in over 140 countries of a reliable and objective measure of public opinion on a wide range of topics. Gallup polls, conducted by the polling division of the Gallup Organization, have in the past uncovered social and economic trends, and proven over the years to have a high degree of accuracy.

In 2009, on behalf of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), Gallup surveyed U.S. opinion leaders on their views of nursing and nursing leadership, particularly the role America’s nurses can and should have in improving access and quality of care, and containing costs. Results of this first-of-a-kind survey titled, Nursing Leadership from Bedside to Boardroom: Opinion Leaders’ Perceptions, were released at a news conference held January 20 at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

In presenting the findings, Dr. Lisa Lavizzo-Mourey, president and CEO of RWJF, characterized the survey as “an action plan that will serve the nation.” She said, “Expanding the leadership of nurses is critical to health care reform. Opinion leaders recognize that we are squandering opportunities to learn from nurses and implement their ideas.”

Survey results back her up. They reflect the perspectives of opinion leaders – not average Americans – from six key groups in charge of what’s happening in health care reform: university faculty, insurance (e.g., presidents, CEOs, vice presidents, etc.), corporate, health services, government and thought leaders. The survey based on 1504 telephone interviews with national opinion leaders that averaged 11 minutes in length confirmed nurses are underutilized and they don’t have the influence in health care reform that they should. Ninety per cent of opinion leaders said they’d like to see nurses have more influence reducing medical errors, nearly 89 per cent said more influence improving quality of care, and 86 per cent said nurses should promote wellness.

Overall, explained Dr Frank Newport, editor-in-chief of the Gallup Poll, who presented the survey findings at the news conference, said nurses are perceived as having a lot to offer. They are continually rated each year by the American public as professionals with the highest of honesty and ethics. Opinion leaders in the Nursing Leadership from Bedside to Boardroom survey ranked nurses at 42 per cent, just below doctors - the highest-ranking group at 53.5 per cent – as a trusted information source for health
and health care, and way above books (29.6 percent), the internet (13 per cent), newspapers (5 per cent) and television (2.6 per cent).

Yet survey findings place nurses at the bottom of the seven possibilities of who will influence health reform in the U.S. in the next five to 10 years. Only 13.8 per cent of responders perceived nurses as influential in health care reform; well below the government (75 per cent), insurance and pharmaceutical executives, doctors and patients.

So why the disjunction? What are the barriers that prevent nurses from contributing to improvements in planning, policy development, and managing health systems and services? The answer, according to the survey, is structural issues. There is not a structure in place, according to Dr. Newport, for people to listen and nurses to say. Key points: almost 70 per cent of opinion leaders perceive nurses as not important decision makers; 68 per cent perceive that it is doctors who generate the revenue; there is no focus on preventive care (that’s huge, says Newport); and nurses lack a single voice on national issues, no leadership opportunities, no strategic vision, and different levels of education. Structural issues.

Solutions, Survey Says
Two major suggestions came from opinion leaders on how nurses could overcome barriers and achieve more influence in key areas of health care. One, nurses must have their voice heard. It must be a single, unified voice that focuses on key issues in health policy. Nurses are perceived by opinion leaders as lacking the interest to be in that role.

Second, there must be higher expectations by society and by nurses around what nurses can achieve. “Nurses should be held accountable for not only providing quality direct patient care, but also for health care leadership.”

Noted Participants
At the news conference, expert responders to survey findings included: Pennsylvania Governor Edward G. Rendell; Dr. Reed Tuckson, executive vice president and chief of medical affairs, UnitedHealth Group; and Dr. Gail Wilensky, senior fellow at Project HOPE, former administrator of the Health Care Financing Administration.

A panel discussion by nurses over the survey findings followed the news conference. Panelists included: Dr. Susan Hassmiller, senior adviser for nursing at RWJF; Dr. Patricia Gerrity, associate dean, College of Nursing and Health Professions, Drexel University; and director of 11th Street Family Health Services; Dr. Richard Hader, senior vice president and CNO at; Meridian Health in New Jersey; a Transforming Care at the Bedside partner; Dr. Beverly Malone, CEO of the National League for Nursing and Dr. Mary Naylor, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, School of Nursing.