



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

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**ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF
WASHINGTON, BOTHELL
NAMED 2001 NURSE OF THE YEAR
BY KING COUNTY NURSES ASSOCIATION**

Dr. Carol Leppa, associate professor of nursing at the University of Washington, Bothell, knew she would never be a teacher. Her mother was a teacher, and both of her sisters are teachers. She decided that she would leave the teaching to them.

Then she had a chance to be in a classroom, and it changed the trajectory of her life forever. The nursing education path has been meaningful and rewarding. And now, Leppa can add one more achievement to her growing list.

The King County Nurses Association has named her 2001 Nurse of the Year.

The honor was given at the King County Nurses Association Annual Spring Banquet, held in May in Ballard. The award is for outstanding achievement and contributions to nursing and the community and is based upon professional activities, significant contribution to the community, professional leadership, and nursing practice quality.

In her role as nursing educator, Leppa sees the classroom as an environment where her students, many of whom have been in the workforce for years in a variety of fields, can bring their life experience and professional expertise to bear on ethical issues and dilemmas facing health care today.

“We have a framework that we develop over the course of a quarter that looks at the different principles involved in ethical issues in health care,” says Leppa. “We create a space where we can explore a complex issue together, and my job is to help guide and draw some limits around what we’re going to spend our time on. I learn as much from them as I hope they learn from me.”

Dr. Leppa, a Seattle resident, has been actively involved in KCNA as President since 1997. She has also served as First Vice President, Member at Large on the Finance Committee, and was recently elected chair of the Nominating Committee. She became involved with KCNA to try and answer a question she asked herself early in her teaching career: Who are these people that do this amazing work and what can be done to help them?

Leppa stresses to her students that nursing is a field of wide open possibility, a field that can not only provide career opportunities, but also foster essential meaning by doing something that matters. Nurses, she says, can move from a clinical setting into school nursing, community nursing, education, management, advocacy, and outreach.

“I tell my students that where they’ve been doesn’t mean that that’s necessarily where they have to stay,” Leppa says.

Currently, Leppa’s research has taken her into the area of long-term health care, chronic illness, and dying. She says she is drawn to the area because long-term nursing is a nursing controlled environment where, despite the heavy regulation, nurses have a great deal of autonomy.

Focusing on long-term care also allows Leppa to focus on what she terms her life’s work, that being palliative, or end of life care. While AIDS and cancer most commonly come to mind in discussing palliative care, Leppa has begun researching broader parameters for such care.

“I want to apply palliative care in a long-term or end of life situation for people who are dying of chronic illnesses,” says Leppa. “We are recognizing that everyone dies; the death rate remains one per person. Palliative care is not saying we are giving up on you, but rather, how do we bring this into the discussion and do active treatment as well? How much treatment is too much and how do we decide on these particular issues?”

Leppa adds, “One of my students said, ‘What we need to do is aggressive comfort care.’ I have taught ethics for 10 years, and it was a phrase I had not heard before. It captures what I think we need to do with palliative care. How do we maintain aggressive comfort care across treatment options?”

Seventy million baby boomers beginning to grapple with their parents chronic illnesses and deaths, as well as looking at their own mortality, will force all of us to have serious discussions focused on long-term health care and dying, says Leppa. “We’re

going to have to have these discussions, and they aren't easy," she says. "In 10 years, I hope that nurses are teaching physicians and physicians are teaching nurses, and we're all working together."

Leppa's ideas about palliative care come from the UK system, which, in her opinion, has a stronger focus on community-based health care. Each year, Leppa takes a group of nursing students to London for 11 days to compare US and UK health care systems. Students take part in developing, analyzing, and talking about specific cases and what's likely to happen to those cases in the different systems. "I'm now working on getting a grant to bring English nurses here to the United States," Leppa says.

"In the future, I would like to have a palliative care approach that is usable and used by people and caregivers making difficult health care and death care decisions," says Leppa. "It's the only research I care about getting done before I die. I want it to be an approach that people will use with me when I'm in the situation where I have to think about that.

KCNA celebrates the work and dedication of America's 2.2 million registered nurses to promote and maintain the health of individuals and the nation. The Association has been promoting healthy communities since 1903 through education, advocacy, and outreach. KCNA is the largest of 26 district organizations serving RNs through the Washington State Nurses Association. Its average membership of 2,000 represents all areas of practice, education, and health care delivery systems.

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