

**2017 Cornell University New York Hospital School of Nursing
Distinguished Alumni Award**

Theresa Pluth Yeo, PhD, MPH, MSN, AOCNP

April 29, 2017

Thank you, Ina, for that introduction and for nominating me for the Distinguished Alumni Award. I am very honored and proud to receive this award. For a farm girl from Minnesota who came to New York City in 1974, this is a Big deal. I want to thank my husband, Dr. Charles Yeo and my aunt Eileen Kelly for accompanying me here today. I come from a long line of nurses: my older sister, my mother's three sisters, four of my first cousins and most recently, my niece received her BSN from Luther College in Iowa. All together we have over 400 years of nursing experience! We can take care of you.

It is indeed an honor to have one's nursing career recognized by their alma mater. Congratulations to fellow DA recipients Linda Hanolan and to Barbara Coombs Lee on her Compassion and Choices presentation and on her outstanding career. I heard her speak from *this* podium last year as the Distinguished Alumnus and it is an honor to follow her this year. Looking at the list of past DA recipients and those assembled here, I feel humbled to be selected for this award. I am indebted to the Cornell University-New York Hospital School of Nursing for the high-quality education and training that I received, which launched me on the path to a fulfilling career as a professional nurse- as clinician, teacher and researcher- all of which I am still doing. I was fortunate to spend 30 years of my career at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore and the last 11 years in Philadelphia at Thomas Jefferson University.

Nursing is a vibrant profession for women and for a growing number of men. Some say they don't have the Stomach for it, but what you really have to have is Heart. In times of distress, patients and their families look to nurses for comfort, for knowledge and, particularly for empathy and compassion. Hope is often the best that we have to offer them. I feel fortunate to have been a nurse during what I would term the "*height of nursing influence*"- In the 1970s and 1980s: we were taught and used physical assessment skills (ala Barbara Bates), we were making nursing diagnoses, formulating nursing orders and had in many ways moved past the "doctor's hand- maiden image of nurses". Today this has evolved to "evidence-based nursing and "best practices".

The field of nursing still offers an exciting career pathway and now- it even pays well! However, there are currently a number of very real challenges facing those who pursue this profession- that we should be mindful of- I will cite 3 that I believe are most important-

1) Professional Encroachment- there is a global need for more trained RNs- and this shortfall is leading to encroachment on nursing jobs by untrained lay workers who perform nursing functions, and who are often called "nurses". We need to be aware that the term "Nurse" is a protected title in only 39 of our 50 states and we must advocate for enforcement of these laws.

2) (The very real issue of) Short-staffing- not just understaffing- but the use of short-staffing as a cost-cutting strategy- requiring RNs to regularly cover more shifts, work extended hours and double shifts, and fill-in for co-workers. Evidence shows that overwork not only leads to "job burnout" but to musculoskeletal injuries such as chronic

back, shoulder, leg, and arm pain, impaired judgement, and an increased risk of diabetes and cardiovascular disease. The practice of “Short-staffing” puts nurses’ own health at risk.

3) Workplace Incivility and Violence- these behaviors have been documented for years and continue to be a job hazard, not just from co-workers and interactions with other nurses and physicians, but increasingly from disappointed and angry patients and their families. Five years ago when my husband and I were a “dynamic duo” of Visiting Professors in Dalian, China – the question that I was most frequently asked *was not* about nursing research or patient care but about how American nurses dealt with physical assaults on nurses by patients and their families! At the time I didn’t realize the extent of this particular problem, but this is a very real concern in the United States as well.

We, as experienced nurses and advanced practice nurses, (even if in retirement) are called to Support and to Mentor our younger nursing colleagues. Often, they are in search of Role Models, Strong Leadership and Professional Encouragement. Florence Nightingale, who displayed great bravery in her life and times, wrote in her reflections: “I attribute my success to this – I never gave or took any excuse”. Good advice indeed.

In closing, International Nurses Week starts May 6 and culminates on May 12, the 197th anniversary of Florence Nightingale’s birth. Fittingly, this year has been designated by the American Nurses’ Association as the “Year of the Healthy Nurse” and the theme is: Nursing: The Balance of Mind, Body, and Spirit. The culture of health and safety must be modeled by nurses.

I wish you all a Happy Nurses Week! I am still proud to be a Nurse. As Maya Angelou wrote: “They may forget your name, but they will *never* forget how you made them feel.”

Thank you to Cornell for a stellar education, and to the Alumni Association for this award and the privilege of the podium.

I salute each and every one of you.