In the 2008 WHO Health and Human Rights Strategy and the 1948 United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights it is stated that every individual shall have the right to an adequate standard of living, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services; yet greater than 50 percent of the American people are denied this right because of a lack of insurance or underinsurance. The escalating costs of health care, now greater than 16.8 percent of the national gross domestic product (GDP), have begun to price most Americans out of this basic right.

President Obama’s national health care plan can be a mechanism to provide affordable health coverage for all. But to be successful, the plan must help alleviate problems in the UNITED STATES health care system that are apparent in comparisons with systems in other countries.

The International Health Policy Survey in November 2008 also found that chronically ill adults across the globe identified major differences in health care access, safety and efficiency; however patients in the United States were at the highest risk of forgoing care because of costs, medical errors, inefficiency of services and poorly organized care. These have been consistent results since 2005. In a recent speech, John Rother from the American Association of Retired Persons noted that the problems of coverage, cost and quality are converging into a “perfect storm.” Overall, the United States spends 50 percent more of our GDP on health care than other countries that cover everybody, have longer life expectancies and lower infant mortality rates.
Indeed, after 15 years of health care work across four developing countries (Ghana, Uganda, Mexico and the Dominican Republic), working collaboratively with 500 advanced practice nurses, nursing students and faculty, I have found that many UNITED STATES citizens have less access to health care and services than the poorest of the poor. There are great lessons to be learned by working in other health care systems. People everywhere have the same health problems including diseases, infections, cancer, and heart disease. But in these four countries health care is “free.” The government provides for all, maybe not adequately but they have taken the United Nations mandate to heart. These countries are providing cost efficient, responsible health care. Nurses have provided direct health care services in collaboration with the providers in these countries as equals, consulting with governmental ministers of health, building hospitals, training village health educators and fervently trying to save lives. Yet, such work in the United States for our own people is not supported.

Embracing these new models of care that are not traditional to the U.S. system can allow the public to take charge and demand its human right to medical care. Nurses who have worked in these other systems can play a vital role in this process as they have learned how to provide the best with limited means. By supporting nurses’ expanded scope of practice, adequately funding public education modalities, and individualized patient and family teachings, we can prevent health problems and prevent their complications.

If 500 nurses, over 15 years, directly affected the health and human rights of more than 75,000 people in four international countries, just think what the current two
million practicing nurses in the United States could do for the health of the American people.

Affordable, quality, comprehensive health care is possible if nurses, especially advanced practice nurses, were supported to practice their full scope of practice. Our expertise involves health education, conducting physical exams to identify health status, health risks and manage health problems. We have improved the lives of children and their families and are skilled at working with culturally diverse peoples. Nurses consult with city, state and national health offices in policy development and many have served in politics. We can reduce the epidemics of obesity, Type 2 diabetes, cancer and heart disease. We can stop the health crisis in the United States and make the U.N.’s human rights declaration a reality.

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