WE KNOW THAT NURSES top the annual Gallup poll as the nation’s most trusted profession, and have done so for years. The public, rightly, trusts us to provide care in a compassionate, honest, professional manner, and we repay that trust every day by continually striving for excellence.

Both the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the recent Institute of Medicine (IOM) report on the future of nursing call for nurses to step up and become a primary force in reshaping the nation’s health care. The ACA features nurses in prominent roles in its bid to promote patient-centered care. The IOM recommends nurses “serve as full partners with physicians and other healthcare professionals in redesigning health care in the United States” and urges nurses to “practice to the full extent of their education and training.” Our leadership role has become more important than ever before.

Some of the highest-profile nurses in the United States serve as fantastic examples of true leadership. Mary Wakefield, PhD, RN, FAAN, immediately comes to mind when I think of nurses who’ve proven to be thought leaders on a grand scale—one of the reasons President Obama named her administrator of the Health Resources and Services Administration at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. From the time she got her start by specializing in rural health in her home state of North Dakota to when she reached the top spot in one of the most prestigious federal health departments, Wakefield has served as an example of the type of leadership to which nurses can aspire.

Loretta Ford, RN, PNP, FAAN, FAANP, who will be inducted into the National Women’s Hall of Fame this fall, is another great example of a nurse who brought her vision and leadership to bear to improve health-care access and delivery. One of the initial founders of the nurse practitioner (NP) movement, Ford has worked tirelessly to expand nursing’s scope of practice. From 1965 until today, her vision has grown from an idea into a new healthcare delivery model.

But don’t think only high-profile efforts can reap big changes. Every day in hospitals, home care, clinics, and dozens of other care settings, nurses lead the way in shaping the future of health care. Nurses can use their critical-thinking skills to take stock of what’s working—and what’s not working—in their practice environment and devise steps to continually improve their processes. This smaller-scale, day-to-day innovation can have a huge impact on our patients and our communities.

Take, for example, Gaye Douglas, Med, MSN, APRN-BC, a school and emergency-department nurse in South Carolina. After noticing that many children she saw for illnesses as a school nurse would show up at her emergency department with minor ailments such as sore throats, Douglas had an idea. She went back to school to become a family NP and founded a campus health center at a local high school to administer frontline health care to the public. Her sacrifice, determination, and dedication to patients should serve as an inspiration to us all. (To read more about her, see “Three nurses take the lead on change” at www.theamericanurse.org.)

ANA urges nurses everywhere to take advantage of opportunities to lead. From the novice nurse who comes into the care setting and provides insight by taking a new look at long-standing inefficiencies, to the veteran nurse who guides a department using years of hard-won experience, to the nurse researcher who pores over spreadsheets and printouts to find new ways to do things—all nurses can lead.

Is it challenging to be a leader? Unequivocally, yes. Instigating change and influencing others to reevaluate the way things are done—especially in a healthcare setting—can be a tricky proposition. It takes a clear vision, strategic thinking, adaptability, tact, and, at times, pure stubbornness to push through old barriers that can hold us back as we look to transform health care.

Let us never forget that true leadership begins with a conviction in thought that’s backed up by hard work and perseverance. Nurses are well suited to this type of challenge because we live it every day. We owe it to our patients and ourselves to take full advantage of this unprecedented opportunity to reshape our healthcare system from the bottom up. I know you are up to that challenge.

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