

Statewide nurses' association promotes life and dignity issues

By Ashly McGlone

LA MIRADA — Lying on the hospital bed in a continuous seizure state, Jennifer Le could hear the doctors and nurses bustling around her. Despite her resolve, she was unable to respond.

Cataclysmic problems resulted when a medication oversight clashed with the epilepsy she had been diagnosed with the previous fall. Le soon found herself debilitated and in a coma.

While she was coming in and out of awareness, she recalls that she overheard the doctor say there was only a 5 percent chance of her coming out of the coma and that even so she would remain in a vegetative state at best. She heard health officials speak about how useful her organs would be if her husband wasn't so stubborn about keeping her alive. She grew frustrated, wishing she could explain she was not a vegetable... that she was still a person... that she could hear them.

Over the course of her weeklong ordeal, Le learned to communicate with blinks, then drawings, then words. Visits from the hospital chaplain, her church prayer group, and her husband gave her hope. More importantly, Le experienced an intimate dialogue with God, even hearing God's calling to the nursing profession; there was work still left to be done, she thought.

Le said she always felt strongly about defending the right to life, but her stint in the hospital in April 1986 reinforced her passion for the cause.

"During times of incapacity, a person is still a person, even when they are incapable of expression and response," Le said.

Supporters for euthanasia often



Members of the California Nurses for Ethical Standards walked in this year's 4th Annual Walk for Life West Coast, held in San Francisco.

justify their argument by speaking of a loss of dignity in suffering. Le strongly disagrees. Believing that it does not change with suffering, Le says dignity is either inherent in an individual or not.

It was a year before Le recovered from her coma, but she is still feeling the effects of it physically. The severity and frequency of her current seizures could be a result, according to her doctors.

In an article titled "Life Is Good" in the winter 2006 edition of *Life Scenes*, a newsletter for the California Nurses for Ethical Standards, Le shares her experience and the impact it had.

"If I had been asked that before, whether I would want to live in a vegetative state, dependent on tubes, I don't know how I would've answered. Of course no one wants to be incapacitated. However, once faced with the reality of it, living is preferable to death," Le said.

Taking a stand

Le knows from experience that end-of-life issues and other ethical dilemmas are faced by nurses daily. The California Nurses for Ethical Standards brings these issues to the discussion table statewide.

With Florence Nightingale as their matriarch, CNES strives to respect the life and dignity of every person: "the preborn, newborn, physically and/or mentally disabled, aged and dying" as stated in their purpose.

"It's not a matter of if you will face an ethical dilemma in nursing. It's when," Le said.

Le served as executive director for CNES from spring 2005 until last spring 2007 when the more severe effects of epilepsy moved her to now serve in a volunteer capacity.

Moral issues such as providing contraceptives with an abortifacient agent, neglecting proper pa-

tient care due to insurance issues, and presenting inappropriate sex education plague the minds of conscientious nurses.

"Life is no longer valued in the same way it once was, and convenience, money, and neglect have marched through ethics," Marsha Schreiber said.

Schreiber is the director of Student Health Services at Biola University, has been a member of CNES since 1996, and is currently on their board of directors.

Working in various capacities, CNES helps its members stave off political injustice dealing with ethical sensitivities.

After refusing to join a union, one nurse was threatened with the termination of her job. With the backing of CNES and under outlined federal protections, she brought clarity about her right to abstain from a union.

The whistle-blower in a neonatal intensive care unit was fired when she spoke up after a severely disabled infant was euthanized. CNES helped to find her pro bono legal counsel when she sued the hospital.

A nurse working in a county jail witnessing unethical practices requested help. Le wrote a letter to the grand jury on her behalf, petitioning an investigation of the site. It took a year and a half, but changes were finally made.

Circumstances like these are the specialty of CNES.

Furthermore, members of CNES have been present at health fairs and pro-life walks, given presentations at high schools on prenatal development and sexually transmitted diseases, provided continued

education courses approved by the California Board of Registered Nursing, and advocated, or more often protested, legislation on Capitol Hill, including pushes for physician-assisted suicide.

"CNES has been vocal in Sacramento in speaking to matters of stem cell research and abortion," Schreiber said. "It is imperative for us to keep the voice of the unborn alive. They cannot speak for themselves, and we stand as an advocate for their important lives."

Ministry birthed

Founded in October 1984 in Mission Viejo as the Southern California Pro-Life Nurses Association, CNES grew into the California Nurses for Ethical Standards and helped to launch the Nebraska Nurses for Ethical Standards and the Oregon Nurses for Life and Health.

CNES is currently fighting its way out of a \$17,000 deficit from last year's losses and is seeking financial donations to stay afloat. More importantly they are looking for people willing to come alongside the organization and serve in one of many capacities.

Their goal for the year ahead include increasing membership by 1,000, gaining sponsorship, providing new continued education courses, and conducting further outreach events.

"When we are called and asked to testify for a bill at legislature, we would like to have the resources to spare someone to do that," Le said.

For more information about the California Nurses for Ethical Standards and how to get involved, visit www.ethicalnurses.org.