HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

J Gerontol Nurs. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2020 June 23.

Published in final edited form as:

J Gerontol Nurs. 2008 October ; 34(10): 8–10. doi:10.3928/00989134-20081001-10.

Dolores M. Alford, PhD, RN, FAAN: Entrepreneur and Scholar

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Abstract

Editor's Note. Although I haven't known Dr. Alford quite as long as Dr. McDougall has, I certainly echo his description of her as an entrepreneur and scholar who has made invaluable contributions to the field of gerontological nursing. Dee has been a leader in so many ways, but I have particularly valued her role with the American Academy of Nursing's Gerontological Interest Group and her steadfast and innovative contributions as an author and Editorial Advisory Board member of the *Journal of Gerontological Nursing*. Dee Alford is someone I can always count on for an insightful review or a fresh idea. I am delighted we are able to shine the *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* Spotlight on this remarkable nurse.

~ Kathleen C. Buckwalter, PhD, RN, FAAN

Editor

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I have known Dolores Alford (“Dee”) for almost 20 years and think of her as an entrepreneur. She has the professional reputation of an independent nursing consultant in Dallas, Texas. But as much as I think of Dee as a successful business-woman—who also happens to be a gerontological nurse—she is first and foremost a scholar.

Dee solidified her scholarly reputation early in her career. In 1962, she wrote *Caring for the Individual Patient: A Student-Centered, Patient-Centered Approach to Fundamentals of Nursing*. She documented her entrepreneurial prowess with the article “Reflections on Private Practice” with colleague Janet Moll in a 1976 issue of the *American Journal of Nursing*. Forty-two years later, Dee’s “Legal Issues in Gerontological Nursing,” a four-part discussion of current and significant legal issues, was published in the *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* (Alford, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d).

Since Dee completed her term on the Foundation Advisory Council for the University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing, she rarely visits Austin. Our visits occur at conferences, and we chat on the telephone and via e-mail. However, Dee seems to be everywhere and know everyone. Her travel schedule is full. We are both alumni of the Louisiana State University Medical Center School of Nursing in New Orleans and the University of Texas at Austin. As native New Orleanians, we were both educated in the Catholic school system and were taught to value formal education, social networks, and higher authority. Writing about someone as well known as Dee is not an easy task; to prepare, I decided to search online and find out what she is doing.

A Google™ search of *Dolores Marsh Alford* yielded some curious hits. Dee is relevant and prominent on the Internet, where one can find that she has contributed scholarly and popular articles to academic journals and the press for many years. Dee is comfortable speaking on most topics that involve care of older adults. She has provided advice on slip and fall prevention, medication misuse, pets and loneliness, developing ambulatory nursing centers, beginning an independent nursing practice, humane nursing homes, and megatrends in the helping professions. What is consistent throughout these writings is that it is clear this woman is a gerontic nurse. Her message is consistent—we must learn to care for older adults in settings throughout the health care continuum, not just in hospitals. I interviewed Dee by telephone for this Spotlight article.

PREROGATIVES AND PRIORITIES IN GERONTOLOGY

In 1983, Dee’s opinion paper, “Prerogatives and Priorities in Gerontology,” was published in the *Journal of Gerontological Nursing*. Her thesis was that “nursing should be a self-governing professional body with the power to administer care under its jurisdictions” (p. 546). Dee argued that gerontological nurses would be the nurses to light the way in the future. The prerogatives included four areas:

- Control our practice.
- Develop our own standards of practice.
- Design nursing practice around a wellness model.

- Conduct clinical nursing research.

The priorities identified were to:

- Make gerontological nursing a major part of the curriculum.
- Help other nurses cope with their feelings about caring for older adults.
- Establish a positive public image of the gerontological nurse.
- Implement and enforce gerontological standards through clinical nursing research.

Dee noted that not too many people have the privilege of forecasting and seeing many of these ideas come true. “I am so proud of gerontic nurses for making these predictions come true,” she said. She also acknowledged that her time on the path to the future is waning (she turned 80 years old in September), but she is willing and eager to support and create opportunities for younger nurses who want to work on behalf of older adults.

Dee has dreamed of links between academic/community centers for excellence in gerontology and gerontic nursing, where older adults can benefit from multidisciplinary care and services in one location. Starting in the mid-1980s, the National Institute on Aging funded five of these academic and community centers for 10 years with the goal of facilitating research between schools of nursing and nursing homes (Butler & Mezey, 1995). In addition, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded and created 11 teaching nursing homes that emphasized improvement in clinical care and a positive learning environment for students.

In a 1984 *Dallas Morning News* article, Joann Schulte wrote that “Alford’s accomplishments in improving nurses’ career options and the health care of the elderly [are] considered so innovative that the American Nurses Association [ANA] honored her with its nursing practice award” (p. C1). Schulte, in an interview with ANA officials, said that “Alford was chosen for the award because she has been a trailblazer in defining an expanded role for nurses and in focusing on the health needs of the elderly” (Schulte, 1984, p. C1).

NATIONAL INITIATIVES IN GERONTOLOGICAL NURSING SINCE 19 3

Gerontological nursing has become an even greater future priority in the United States. The most visible national initiative occurred in 1996 with the John A. Hartford Foundation. Its mission was and still is to “increase the nation’s capacity to provide effective and affordable care to its rapidly increasing older population” (The John A. Hartford Foundation, 2007, p. 2). This initiative allowed four new Hartford Centers of Geriatric Nursing Excellence to be funded at nursing schools across the country. Currently, there are 9 Centers of Geriatric Nursing Excellence.

The success of this epic initiative can also be seen through the Hartford Foundation’s investment in human capital. The Building Academic Geriatric Nursing Capacity (BAGNC) scholars and fellows represent 35 states and the District of Columbia. To date, a total of 174 scholarships and fellowships have been granted for this competitive award program (BAGNC, n.d.). In addition, the scholars and fellows have produced 197 papers, led 286

presentations, taught or supervised more than 115 courses, and applied for and received more than \$3.77 million in funding (“The John A. Hartford Foundation,” 2006). Another feature included a special issue of the *Journal of Professional Nursing*, entitled “The Geriatric Nursing Education Project” (Olshansky, 2006), which included six papers on baccalaureate curricula and six papers on graduate programs.

In 2008, the Institute of Medicine published *Retooling for an Aging America: Building the Health Care Workforce*. The report can be summarized into five high-priority areas: Workforce shortage threatens quality of care; all providers should be competent in geriatric care; higher salaries and financial incentives are needed; family members and other informal caregivers need training; and Medicare hinders delivery of quality care. The report recommends the necessary reforms take place by 2030, the year by which all Baby Boomers will be age 65 or older. These changes in national policy build on Dee’s forecasts from 1983.

Dee argued for nursing standards in her 1983 prerogatives and priorities article. As a profession, we have developed standards of practice. In July 2000, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, in partnership with the John A. Hartford Foundation Institute for Geriatric Nursing, published *Older Adults: Recommended Baccalaureate Competencies and Curricular Guidelines for Geriatric Nursing Care*. This was no small effort and required the expertise of nearly 30 leaders and multiple professional nursing associations in gerontological nursing.

Dee continues to speak about standards of care and hopes this will improve the care of older adults. One of her goals is to help nurses understand how to implement these nursing standards in practice. She is an expert witness and testifies in court cases involving older adults and the care they have received in nursing homes. Dee provides consultation to the U.S. Department of Justice on matters of civil right violations of institutionalized older adults. She is an avid traveler, often representing gerontic nurses here and abroad. She is also very interested in older travelers; in fact, her doctoral dissertation was entitled “Health Behaviors of Older International Travelers.” She was invited to present her innovative study at the World Congress of Gerontology and Geriatrics in Acapulco, Mexico, and at the European Social Science meeting in Barcelona, Spain. In fact, Dee has become influential in the growing industry of “geriatric emporiatrics.” That is, she wants older adults to be able to travel worldwide safely and comfortably.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Dee practices what she preaches. A few years ago, she sold her single family home and moved into what she described as her “granny flat.” Dee has been single for many years since her husband passed away, and she realized that family was an important component of successful aging in place. Her flat encompasses one wing of her nephew’s house, where she is surrounded by her beloved books and computer. She shares the flat with her sister, T.J., who is her nephew’s mother. Again, Dee is showing us how multigenerational living can be effected. She was excited to talk about this new living arrangement that she created with her family.

We all need role models to show us possibilities, and Dee has been a role model for so many of us who are second-generation and third-generation gerontic nurses. I have benefited from the experience and wisdom that Dee shares. For example, we have both represented Texas as members of the Development Committee for the American Academy of Nursing.

Dee continues to mentor the next generation of gerontic nursing scholars. She is an active sponsor of graduate students through the Hartford Foundation's BAGNC initiative. She also serves as a community member for doctoral students' dissertation committees.

Every subsequent generation hopefully learns from previous generations. The leaders in gerontological nursing are able to share their knowledge and experience as a legacy with the next generation through multiple sources. However, a scholarly essay, such as this Spotlight feature in the *Journal of Gerontological Nursing*, guarantees these leaders will be remembered at least for their intellectual contributions from which the rest of us are able to reap the benefits and build on.

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[Dee] is willing and eager to support and create opportunities for younger nurses who want to work on behalf of older adults.

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