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I will never forget the way that the mother’s face shifted from agony and exhaustion, to sheer joy the moment the nurse informed her, “It’s a boy!” In that precise moment, to the mother, the hospital conditions were obsolete, the doctor, and his indifference, disappeared. Her pain seemed suddenly absent. The uterinity of her face was indistinguishable from that of any new mother. It was an unforgettable moment that, in contrast to the vast differences in health care from North America to Nicaragua, spoke to the commonalities of powerful and awe-inspiring experiences, like birth, that we share cross-culturally.

When I left the hospital that night, my mind stirred with emotions: frustration, disbelief and awe. I considered the magnitude of health care disparities in Nicaragua, the role that health care professionals play in exacerbating or alleviating such inequalities and the delicate balance between efficiency and good ethical practice. I acknowledged my own inexperience, but couldn’t help but think, there has to be a better way.

The implications of what I witnessed are complex; and each element of the story could be interpreted in many ways. It’s not my goal to criticize an judge, only to consider how I can make a difference in patient care both at home and abroad. My experience as a Fulbrighter reaffirmed the value of health care practitioners who commit to advocating for all their patients; and ultimately gave impetus to my own ambitions as an aspiring nurse.

I recently sat down with Dr. Marilyn Stringer to gain her insights into the nursing and health care research for women in developing nations. Dr. Stringer is Penn Nursing’s Women’s Health Nurse Practitioner Program Director, and her current areas of global involvement are Egypt and Thailand. Dr. Stringer teaches a comparative health systems course which includes field work in Thailand, and she has played a vital role in consulting about the development of Advanced Practice Nursing programs in Thailand. Dr. Stringer currently serves as a mentor to Howieda Ahmen Abdel-Mohimen Foully, MA, a visiting scholar from the Faculty of Nursing, Assiut University, Egypt. Mrs. Foully’s doctoral work is focused on investigating the efficacy of an alternative to the Pap smear, for cervical cancer screening in developing nations.

In our conversation, Dr. Stringer pointed out several challenges to women’s health research globally. “The underlying problem in developing nations is women are not valued, so it’s difficult to have women’s issues as a national priority for governmental funding. That’s a barrier,” she explained. In areas where the government is unable to fund research, private business corporations may be the only ones who are conducting studies related to their health care products. But as Dr. Stringer commented, if “women’s health is not valued,” and true “equality for women is not apparent,” most of the research that does take place is not focused on women. Another presenting challenge to research is that many vital topics in women’s health may be culturally taboo to discuss, including sex practices, STD’s, HPV, cervical cancer, and domestic violence.

Despite these barriers, Dr. Stringer had a lot to say about positive areas of growth in global women’s health research. She commended Sigma Theta Tau and well as the International Council on Women’s Health Issues (ICOWHI) for bringing together nurse leaders from around the world to network and share insights. Under the leadership of Penn Afia Melis and our Global Health Affairs office, Penn Nursing boasts many strong international partnerships. Such relationships are instrumental in supporting nurse leaders to pursue education and research, for themselves and for the women and men of their nations.

In the future, Dr. Stringer looks forward to increasing partnerships with Thailand and other countries, especially in her area of expertise with healthy pregnancies and the prevention of postmen birth. She sees valuable lessons that we can learn from the Thai health system, which has a deep cultural sense of community and an increasing emphasis on health promotion. Dr. Stringer anticipates a time when women worldwide receive equal education, health care, and the empowerment to lead a healthy life.