When Caring for New Yorkers, Our Strength Comes from Diversity

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As a young girl growing up in China, Li Chen dreamed about her future, writing at night in her diary, promising herself she would be a nurse, no matter the odds. Across the world in Ecuador, Maria Chauca fostered the same dreams as a child, playing nurse to her dolls, rescuing them from imagined illnesses and injuries, setting them right with tiny bandages and her child's view of "medicine."

Their drive and desire to care for others would take them across countries and continents, landing them here in New York, one of the most diverse cities in the world. Today, years on from those childhood dreams, Maria and Li bring decades of clinical experience to the patients
they care for at the home- and community-based nonprofit health care organization VNS Health. As a Hospice Care nurse, Maria brings comfort to New Yorkers of all backgrounds. And as a Health Plans Care Coordinator, Li helps simplify and ensure access to care for vulnerable New Yorkers with multiple complex chronic illnesses or mobility challenges.

With May being National Nurse's Month, there's still time to celebrate the important role played by thousands of diverse Home Care nurses and Care Managers, as they help people live and age safely and independently at home.

For these nurses, the "Capital of the World" (as New York City is often referred to) is exactly where they want to be. As the population of older adults in America's "melting pot" grows, the need for accomplished clinicians from all walks of life is critically important.

The compassion and expertise nurses like Maria and Li bring to our community are invaluable. In New York, where over a third of the population was born in another country, caring for others requires keen cultural understanding and empathy. The organization where Li, Maria and I all work provides care in 50+ languages, and the diversity of our city is mirrored by the diversity of our workforce.

“It’s one of the things that I love most about being a Home Care nurse here,” Maria says, “knowing that I’m one of more than a thousand nurses whose approach to care is really focused on the individual. We can see the difference we make when we walk through the door of each patient’s home.”

Li started her career as a nurse in China, but when she made the decision to emigrate to the U.S., she was determined to continue realizing her dreams.

“I love helping others, and I enjoy communicating and educating people—so I know I’ve always been on the right path, no matter where my patients or I live,” said Li.

For Maria, relocating to New York was a crucial moment in her journey. When Maria and her family had the opportunity to move to the U.S. in her teens, one of her first thoughts went to her future role: “I knew then that I could become a nurse!”

As many new Americans know, breaking into a new career in a new home is not easy. Health Plans Care coordinator at VNS Health, Natalia Kon, learned firsthand how tough it is breaking into a specialty field in a new country. Natalia started her career as a cardiologist in her home country of Russia, but after emigrating to New York City, re-entered health care in a new role as a nurse.

However she realized early on that her unique background could be an asset, finding herself caring for many Russian-speaking patients in her first nursing job. Being fluent in Russian, Natalia could bridge the gap between her patients and other clinicians.

After those early experiences., Natalia knew she wanted to specialize in an area of nursing that allowed her to build close relationships with her patients. Not one afraid of taking chances, she was drawn to the independence and problem-solving central to home care nursing. As Natalia notes, “You definitely need to have strength in this role and a strong sense of responsibility to make those important decisions on your own, when a patient is in front of you and needs you in that moment.”

Clinicians who have lived among multiple cultures and communities can also be more in tune to
preconceptions that a patient may have. For example, Maria has met families that misunderstood or didn't know what hospice care entailed. "Growing up in a country where hospice care doesn't really exist, I know that the prospect can be very scary for patients who have never heard of hospice," she said. "It's a simple thing, but I find by asking questions and listening you can really understand where someone is coming from and help them feel supported."

We cannot underestimate the contributions of healthcare workers who have come to New York City from across the world. Immigrants make up 37% of the healthcare workforce in New York and are a critically important part of our health care ecosystem. As we welcome the next generation of caregivers, joining the thousands of home care clinicians caring for the most vulnerable, the one "language" we can all speak, no matter where we come from, is compassion.

Jennifer Brullo is a former senior vice president of Patient Care Services at VNS Health.

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