

A conversation with Patricia Flatley Brennan



The new director of the National Library of Medicine gives nurses advice on advancing their careers.

PATRICIA FLATLEY BRENNAN, PhD, RN, FAAN, is the director of the National Library of Medicine (NLM), the world's largest biomedical library and the producer of digital information services used by scientists, health professionals, and members of the public worldwide. She's the first nurse and the first woman to hold this post. A member of ANA, Brennan was sworn in as NLM director last September. We recently interviewed her.

How did you shape your nursing career?

Casual conversations, the generosity of nurse leaders who reached out to me at different times in my career, and lifelong engagement all made a world of difference in how my career developed. I had originally anticipated becoming a psychiatric nurse, spending my time in the direct care of patients. And although my career didn't turn out exactly the way I envisioned it, it ended up being what I wanted—using information to improve health care and patients' self-care.

What achievements are you most proud of?

Patients deserve the same quality of information technology that's available to healthcare providers. So I'm proud of a pattern of work that illustrates how technology, such as innovative apps, can help people manage their care. I'm also proud of my 23-year-old son Conor. There's a perception that you have to choose between your career and family. It's not always easy, but you can do both. I'm delighted with my family and with my career.

What is your role at the NLM and what should nurses know about this institute?

The NLM is one of the 27 institutes and centers within the National Institutes of Health—and the oldest. I'm responsible for overseeing nearly half a

billion dollars in funding to disseminate biomedical research globally, store information, design information technology, and preserve our knowledge of health from all around the globe. For example, we have 10th-century Arabic manuscripts, oral histories capturing Native American healing traditions, and manuscripts from the 1960s written in ballpoint pen.

How does your nursing background benefit the NLM?

The definition of nursing connects health with the human response, which is a component less common in the literature. As a nurse and director of the NLM, I'll be able to expand the language of health, like nursing does, to include not only information on gene expression, for example, but also on how a person views his or her own health and how family support influences an individual's health.

Also, my work has always involved public policy, such as enabling people to access information in their own health record. NLM is about access to information, which nurses can use to develop public policy.

What advice can you give nurses about advancing their career or an issue important to them?

Don't become immobilized by fear or be afraid to make mid-career corrections, especially if you feel you're not in the right place or role. I am 63 and have worked in many places. But moving to Washington, DC, was perhaps the most difficult choice, because I had been at the University of Wisconsin for 20 years. I had to leave behind my family, my friends, and my neighborhood. But it's been exciting, and I'm the first nurse to be appointed as director of the NLM.

Looking at leadership, I don't see it as something you "provide." Leadership is a service to people, and it's up to others to determine if they accept your leadership on an issue or not. You might have the greatest idea in the world, but it may go nowhere if you haven't taken the time to build partnerships. That's how critical they are. ★

Follow Brennan on Twitter: @NLMdirector. Read about her swearing-in ceremony on September 12, 2016 at <https://infocus.nlm.nih.gov/2016/09/19/dr-brennan-publicly-sworn-in-as-nlm-director/>.