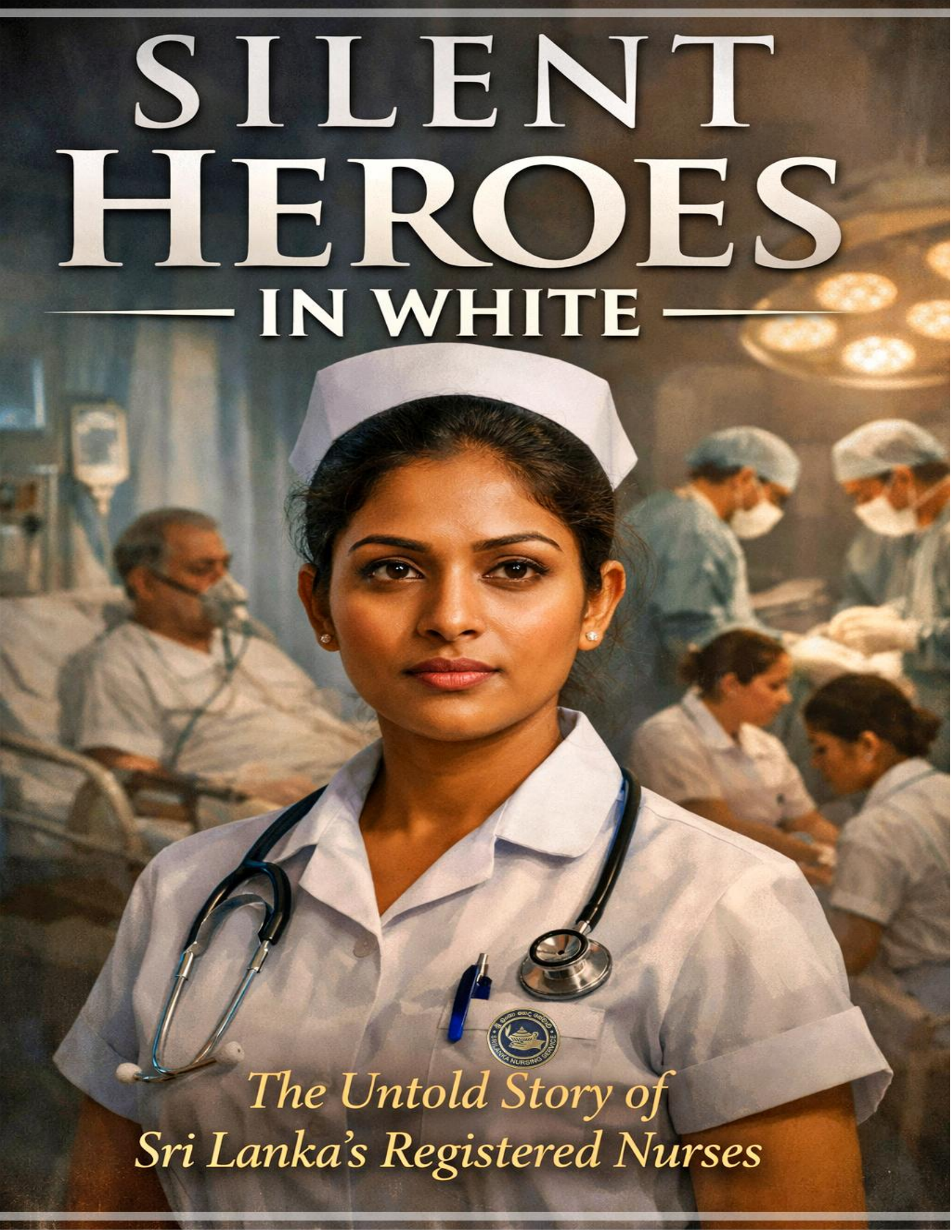
SILENT HEROES IN WHITE



The Untold Story of Sri Lanka's Registered Nurses

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The Untold Story of Sri Lanka's Registered Nurses

A 25-Part Investigation into the Lives, Struggles, and Future of Those Who Keep Sri Lanka's Public Health System Alive

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Authored by

Mahesh Nishantha, BTR, RN (SL)

Professional Member, Canadian Therapeutic Recreation Association (CTRA)
Diploma in General Nursing | Dementia Care | Measuring and Valuing Health | Recreation and Leisure Studies

Former Registered Nurse,
30 Years' Clinical Experience | Healthcare Experience Across Three Countries

Part 1: A Personal Beginning — Why This Story Needs to Be Told

There is a sound that stays with you long after you leave nursing. It is not the sharp beep of a monitor or the hurried footsteps down a corridor. It is the sound of someone calling your name in the dark when they are afraid, and you are the only person there. My wife and I heard that sound for fourteen years while working as Registered Nurses in some of Sri Lanka's most demanding public hospitals. We heard it in busy cancer wards, in the middle of night shifts, and in the quiet exhaustion after a shift that was never meant to last as long as it did. Fourteen years later, living and working in a Western country, we still miss it.

I want to be transparent from the start. I am not a policymaker, administrator, or trade union leader. I am a former nurse. I write this series as someone who knows what it feels like to care for ninety patients with too few colleagues, too little equipment, and no guarantee of a meal break. I also write as someone who has since worked within health systems in three countries and has had the rare opportunity to see nursing from angles most people never get to see.

We were fortunate in many ways. We worked alongside wonderful colleagues, supportive teammates, caring ward sisters, and experienced nursing leaders who set high standards and held us to them. But we also encountered the other side: coworkers who showed little respect for patients or juniors, nurse managers too entangled in trade union politics to lead fairly, and nursing educators with impressive academic credentials but a troubling absence of compassion. The Sri Lankan nursing system, like any human institution, was never just one thing.

Nursing school, for us, was strict in ways that may seem unimaginable today. It was a place shaped by fear, rigid rules, and relentless physical demands. As students, we worked five consecutive night shifts with barely a few hours of sleep between them. The physical load was crushing, and the mental pressure never really lifted. Yet those difficulties shaped something in us. They built discipline, resilience, and an instinctive ability to function under pressure. We are not romanticizing hardship; we are simply acknowledging that difficulty and meaning are not always opposites.

We eventually migrated to give our children broader choices. That decision was not a rejection of Sri Lanka or of nursing. We loved our work. We still do. Many of our deepest friendships were formed on night shifts and during moments of crisis. The sense of purpose that nursing gave us is something no salary figure or job title in another field has ever replicated.

But purpose does not pay rent. And love of a profession does not make understaffing safe, or low wages fair, or burnout acceptable. This is why, when I began noticing a surge of negative comments about nursing in Sri Lanka online, I felt something shift in me. People were talking about low wages, brutal shift patterns, dangerous staff shortages,

and overwhelming workloads. These concerns are real. They deserve serious attention, not slogans.

What I did not see, though, was a clear and practical long-term plan. I saw posters. I saw letters from trade unions. I saw statements issued and then forgotten. What I did not see was a shared ten-year vision focused on improving standards, nursing education, professional recognition, and quality of care. That absence is what prompted this series.

Over the coming parts, I plan to examine every significant aspect of what it means to be a government Registered Nurse in Sri Lanka today: the roles and responsibilities that the public rarely sees, the structural crises in staffing and resources, the financial reality of a nurse's salary against Sri Lanka's cost of living, the burnout epidemic quietly consuming the workforce, and the concrete reforms that evidence from around the world suggests can actually work. I also want to look at what a genuinely modern, professional nursing system would look like in Sri Lanka, and why building one is not idealism but an urgent national interest.

Government-registered nurses are the backbone of Sri Lanka's public healthcare system. They work in overcrowded hospitals, rural clinics, and community settings, caring for patients from all walks of life. They carry a responsibility that most people never fully see. The goal of this series is not to criticize for the sake of criticism, but to shed a clear light on a reality that affects every Sri Lankan family. When a loved one is admitted to a government hospital, the quality of nursing care they receive will shape everything that follows. It is time we talked honestly about the people who provide that care and the conditions under which they do so.

Part 2: The Numbers Behind the Shortage — One Nurse, Too Many Patients

Before we can talk about solutions, we must be honest about the scale of the problem. And the scale is considerable.

According to the 2023 Annual Health Bulletin published by Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health, approximately 53,000 Registered Nurses serve the entire country. They care for a population of over 22 million people. That works out to roughly 2 nurses for every 1,000 people. When you hold that number up against the pressure those nurses face every single day, it stops being a statistic and starts feeling like an injustice.

In real hospital life, those numbers translate into something very difficult to describe to anyone who has not lived it. A single nurse may be responsible for ten, fifteen, or even more patients during one shift. In the busiest wards, the ratio is far worse. I remember working in a cancer unit at a major teaching hospital in 2001, where five or six nurses

were responsible for 90 to 100 patients. That was not an anomaly during a crisis. That was a normal shift.

And cancer nursing is not simple nursing. It involves administering cytotoxic drugs that require precise handling and close monitoring. It means providing emotional support to patients who are frightened, sometimes dying, and often in pain. It means teaching patients and their families about their illness and treatment. It means assisting doctors during procedures, managing medication supplies, maintaining accurate records, and juggling all of this simultaneously. The idea that five nurses can do this safely for a hundred patients is not a plan. It is a daily act of faith and extraordinary human effort.

One experience remains vivid in my memory above all others. On a night shift in 2001, only my wife and I were on duty in the unit. A situation like a strike had left the ward impossibly understaffed. The two of us cared for approximately ninety patients through the night. It was physically exhausting and emotionally overwhelming in equal measure. But we stayed. Patients cannot be left alone in the dark.

This is not a story about heroism, though heroism was involved. It is a story about a system that routinely places two human beings in a position where they must attempt the impossible and then acts as though that is a sustainable arrangement.

The public, in large part, does not see this. Many people encounter nurses briefly in a hospital corridor or through the heavily dramatized lens of television serials, forming impressions that bear little resemblance to the reality of shift work in a busy public hospital. By sharing these experiences, the aim is not to generate pity, but to build genuine understanding. Because when people truly understand what nurses face, it becomes much harder to dismiss their concerns, and much harder for policymakers to continue treating nursing workforce issues as a low priority.

More importantly, the awareness that public understanding fosters can motivate the meaningful policy discussions that Sri Lanka's nursing profession urgently needs. In the posts that follow, we will examine the daily reality of nursing work in detail, beginning with the roles and responsibilities that most people never even know exist.

Part 3: More Than a Face in the Ward — Who the Registered Nurse Really Is

When most people picture a nurse, the image that comes to mind is shaped by what they have seen from the patient's side of the bed. A figure in white who adjusts a drip, takes a temperature, or offers a reassuring word before a procedure. It is a real image, but it is incomplete: seeing only the front of a building tells you nothing about what supports it.

Sri Lankan culture has never quite settled on a single image of the nurse. There is a tender one, captured in the well-known song by Wally Bastiansz, which describes the

nurse as a princess of the hospital, a figure of grace and devoted care. There is also a harsher image: the stern ward nurse who does not smile, speaks sharply, and seems too busy or too tired to stop and listen. The truth, as it usually does, lives somewhere between these two portraits. Nurses are neither angels nor symbols of cold bureaucracy. They are human beings doing an extraordinary job under constant pressure, and the gap between how they are perceived and how they live their professional lives is one of the most important stories in Sri Lankan healthcare.

What the public rarely appreciates is the unique and irreplaceable position nurses occupy within the healthcare system. Nurses are the only health professionals who remain with patients twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, without interruption. Doctors, consultants, and specialists visit wards, examine patients, give instructions, and then move on to their next case. Even house officers, who often remain longer than consultants, eventually leave the ward to rest or study. Nurses do not. From the moment a patient is admitted until they are discharged or transferred, the nurse is present. That continuous presence is not simply a logistical arrangement. It is the foundation on which safe hospital care rests.

This is not meant to diminish the vital contributions of doctors, physiotherapists, laboratory technologists, or any other health professional. Healthcare is a team effort, and every role matters. But the team has a constant, and that constant is the nurse. Nurses notice the small change in breathing that signals something serious is happening. Nurses are there when the medication is due at three in the morning. Nurses are the ones a frightened patient reaches for in the middle of the night when no one else is around.

Understanding this is important not just for professional respect, but also for patient safety. When nursing is undervalued, understaffed, or poorly supported, the consequences are not abstract. They are felt in wards, by patients, and sometimes in outcomes that cannot be undone. The following parts of this series will examine exactly what nurses do in those wards, and why that work is more complex, demanding, and consequential than most people realize.

Part 4: What Nurses Actually Do — The Visible and the Hidden

If you asked a random member of the public to describe a nurse's job, you would likely hear about giving injections, taking temperatures, and following the doctor's instructions. These things are all real. They are also only a fraction of the picture.

To understand the full scope of nursing work, it helps to start with a framework. The general duty list for Registered Nurses, as outlined on the Canadian government's occupational standards website, includes patient assessment, medication administration, monitoring and documenting patient conditions, assisting with clinical procedures, operating medical equipment, coordinating with other health team members, supporting

discharge planning, and educating patients and families. On paper, this sounds like a manageable set of tasks. In a busy Sri Lankan government hospital with too few staff and too many patients, these tasks happen simultaneously, continuously, and under significant pressure.

The most fundamental nursing duty is also the most invisible: constant observation. Registered Nurses monitor vital signs throughout every shift, including blood pressure, temperature, pulse rate, and oxygen saturation. But experienced nursing goes far beyond reading numbers on a monitor. It involves recognizing patterns. A nurse who has worked in a ward long enough learns to notice the patient who is slightly more confused than yesterday, or the one whose breathing has become just a little more effortful, or the person whose colour has shifted in a way that does not show up on any chart. These observations, made through experience and careful attention over many hours, often catch deterioration before it becomes a crisis.

When something is wrong, nurses act. Within their scope of practice, they initiate immediate care, alert doctors, and begin the coordination process that emergencies demand. This decision-making happens quickly, often amid multiple other demands, and has direct consequences for whether a patient survives, recovers well, or deteriorates.

Medication safety is one of the heaviest responsibilities nurses carry. It is also one of the areas where the consequences of error are most severe. Nurses follow what are known as the ten rights of medication administration: ensuring the right patient receives the right medication, in the right dose, through the right route, at the right time, for the right reason, with the right documentation, respecting the patient's right to refuse, providing the right education, and monitoring the right response afterwards. That is not a checklist to tick off in five minutes. It is a careful, disciplined process that must be repeated accurately many times per shift for every patient.

Nurses are often the first to notice medication side effects, because they are close to patients throughout the day. A rash that appears an hour after a new antibiotic was given, dizziness after a blood pressure medication, nausea that signals a reaction rather than ordinary discomfort: these are the things nurses catch before they escalate. In overcrowded, understaffed wards, this vigilance is what stands between patients and serious harm.

Beyond clinical tasks, nurses assist patients with the most basic functions of daily life: bathing, eating, moving safely, managing pain, and maintaining dignity. This is not unskilled work. Moving an immobile patient without causing injury requires technique. Supporting someone through their meal when they are weakened by illness requires patience and knowledge. Helping a person manage their pain, communicate their needs, and feel less afraid requires emotional intelligence that cannot be trained in a classroom alone.

All of this work happens in the background, mostly unseen by visitors who spend an hour at a bedside and then go home. The weight of it is carried by nurses across every shift, in every ward, in every government hospital in the country.

Part 5: The Invisible Architecture of a Nursing Shift

There is a common misconception that nursing is a reactive profession: something happens to a patient, and then the nurse responds. The reality is quite different. Nursing is, at its core, a proactive discipline, one that depends on planning, coordination, and the kind of systemic thinking that most people never see, because when it works properly, nothing goes visibly wrong.

Every nursing shift begins with a careful review. Before a nurse can care for a single patient, they must understand the full picture of the ward: which patients are stable, which are deteriorating, which are waiting for procedures, which have critical medication schedules, and which families will need time and attention during visiting hours. This assessment shapes everything that follows. Wound care, fluid monitoring, post-surgical mobility, and preparation for diagnostics: all of this must be planned and sequenced so that nothing critical is missed and limited time is used wisely.

Beyond individual patient care, nurses serve as the coordination hub of the entire ward. When a doctor orders a CT scan, it is the nurse who contacts the radiology department, prepares the patient, ensures the relevant information accompanies them, and follows up when the results return. When a patient needs physiotherapy, a dietitian consultation, or a social work assessment, the nurse coordinates the referral and ensures the patient is ready and informed. In a busy government hospital where departments are under pressure and communication channels are imperfect, this coordination function is not a supporting role. It is the connective tissue that holds the care of a whole ward together.

Documentation is the record of all this effort, and it is far more than paperwork. Every vital sign, every medication given, every change in a patient's condition, every significant conversation: these must be recorded accurately and on time. These records allow the next nurse or doctor to understand exactly what has happened and continue care safely. They protect patients from errors that arise when information is lost between shifts. They also provide legal and professional protection for nurses themselves, in a system where accountability can fall on the person nearest to the patient when something goes wrong.

Infection control is another area of nursing work that happens quietly and constantly. Proper hand hygiene, proper equipment cleaning, safe disposal of clinical waste, isolation precautions for infectious patients, and educating families about hygiene practices: these are not glamorous tasks, but they are among the most consequential. In a public hospital with many patients in close quarters and limited ventilation, a single lapse in infection control can affect many people. Nurses are the primary line of defence against hospital-

acquired infections, and they maintain that defence across every hour of every shift, even when they are exhausted, short-staffed, and working without adequate supplies.

What emerges from all of this is a picture of a profession that operates at a level of complexity and consequence that is rarely acknowledged in public discourse. The next part of this series examines the final dimensions of nursing work that are most often overlooked, and then we will turn to what is perhaps the central question: why, given all of this, are Sri Lankan nurses so severely unsupported?

Part 6: Education, Emotion, and the Weight of Invisible Labour

There is a moment that happens in almost every hospital ward, many times a day, that most visitors never witness. A doctor leaves after a five-minute consultation. The door closes. And the patient, or the family member sitting by the bed, turns to the nurse with the questions they did not ask while the doctor was in the room. What does this diagnosis mean for my life? Will the treatment hurt? What happens if it does not work? What should we do when we go home?

Nurses answer these questions. They explain diagnoses in plain language, translate clinical instructions into practical guidance, and help frightened people understand what is happening to their bodies and what will be done about it. They teach patients how to manage medications at home, care for wounds after discharge, and recognize warning signs that require returning to the hospital. This education function is not peripheral to nursing care. For many patients, it is the most important conversation they have during an entire hospital stay.

Emotional support is equally demanding and equally invisible. When a patient receives a serious diagnosis, or when a family is waiting outside an operating theatre, or when someone is in pain at two in the morning with no one but the nurse for company, the human presence of a skilled, compassionate nurse is not a luxury. It is care. It can reduce anxiety, improve cooperation with treatment, and meaningfully affect recovery. This kind of care cannot be automated or delegated to someone who is not there.

And yet, delivering this kind of education and emotional support consistently is genuinely difficult, for reasons that deserve honest acknowledgment. Time is the most immediate constraint. After completing urgent clinical tasks, administering medications, monitoring patients, responding to emergencies, and managing the ward, nurses typically have very little calm time left for extended patient conversations. This is not a failure of individual nurses. It is a structural failure of a system that has not provided enough nurses to allow this work to be done properly.

Keeping professional knowledge current is another real challenge. Most nurses develop strong practical skills through years of hands-on experience. But theoretical knowledge can become outdated without structured, mandatory continuing education to keep it up to

date. In many Western countries, regular professional development is required to maintain nursing registration. This requirement exists because healthcare changes, and a nurse who qualified fifteen years ago and has had no structured updates since then may be applying knowledge that has since been superseded. Supporting ongoing learning is not an optional extra for a profession operating in modern healthcare. It is a fundamental requirement of safe practice. We will return to this in detail when we discuss continuing professional development.

Beyond the bedside, nurses also serve as a coordination point that spans the entire hospital system. They are the people who ensure that a patient moves smoothly from admission through investigation, treatment, and discharge, with accurate information following them at every stage. This requires clinical knowledge, communication skills, patience, and the ability to think across systems while simultaneously managing multiple urgent tasks. It is, in every meaningful sense, professional work of a high order. The failure to recognize it as such has real consequences not only for nurses but also for every patient in Sri Lanka's public hospitals.

Part 7: Respect, Reputation, and the Complicated Public Image of Nursing

The relationship between Sri Lankan society and its nurses is long, layered, and genuinely contradictory. To understand where nursing stands today, it helps to understand how that relationship has evolved.

For much of Sri Lanka's modern history, the nurse occupied a position of real community respect. In villages and small towns, the government hospital nurse or the public health nurse who made home visits was a trusted figure: someone who could give injections, dress wounds, explain an illness, and offer practical guidance that made a concrete difference to everyday health. Families with a nurse among them felt a quiet pride. Nursing was seen as honourable work, meaningful in the way that few careers are.

This respect extended, with some modifications, into urban areas as well. Nurses were sometimes overshadowed by the higher social status accorded to doctors, but the image of the nurse as compassionate, patient, and dedicated remained broadly positive. Nurses who worked long-term in the same hospital or community became familiar and trusted figures. The fact that families entrust their most vulnerable loved ones to nurses day after day reflects a foundation of trust built over decades of genuine service.

But public perception is not static or uniform. Alongside this respect, a more critical image has grown. Some people describe nurses as short-tempered, rude, or difficult to approach. Others believe that nurses are perpetually on strike and have concluded that strikes reflect a lack of care for patients rather than a response to genuine grievances. Because nurses are the most visible staff members in the ward, frustration about the

system often lands on them, even when the real problem is understaffing, resource shortage, or a structural failure that no individual nurse caused or could fix.

What gets lost in these perceptions is the human reality behind them. A nurse who does not smile after twelve hours of managing fifteen critically ill patients is not a cold person. A nurse who cannot stop to answer a detailed question because she is in the middle of administering time-sensitive medications is not indifferent. These are people functioning at the outer edge of their capacity, in conditions that most critics have never experienced and would not choose to experience.

Gender stereotypes complicate the picture further. Nursing is still widely perceived as a female profession, associated more with caring instinct than with professional skill. Male nurses face their own set of challenges: they are sometimes mistaken for attendants or assumed to be doctors simply because they are men. These assumptions are not harmless. They undermine professional identity and reinforce the idea that nursing is not a skilled occupation but a gendered service role.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, something shifted. Media, politicians, and ordinary citizens described nurses as heroes. Communities clapped. There were messages of gratitude and public acknowledgment of the risks nurses were taking. For a period, society clearly saw what nurses contribute. That recognition mattered to many nurses. But it also revealed something uncomfortable: the idea of nurses as heroes can sometimes function as a substitute for structural change rather than a prompt for it. Applause and social media posts do not improve staffing ratios, raise wages, or provide mental health support. True respect must be expressed through policy, not just sentiment.

The path forward requires honesty from both sides. The public needs a more complete understanding of what nurses actually do, and why the system sometimes produces interactions that feel cold or abrupt. Nurses, in turn, have a responsibility to reflect on their communication and professionalism, because public trust is genuinely important to the future of the profession. This is not about assigning blame. It is about building the mutual understanding that a healthier relationship between nurses and the public requires.

Part 8: Shift Work Without End — The Reality of Nursing Hours in Sri Lanka

The hospital never closes. That simple fact defines the working life of every Registered Nurse in Sri Lanka's government system, and everything that follows from it.

Officially, a full-time government nurse works a thirty-six-hour week, spread across six days. That is the figure on paper. The reality experienced by most nurses bears little resemblance to it. Chronic staff shortages mean the scheduled hours are a starting point

rather than a limit. For many nurses, the working week stretches well beyond what any occupational health standard would consider safe.

Night shifts are typically twelve hours long. In many hospitals, they stretch to sixteen or eighteen hours when the next shift's nurse does not arrive or when a crisis extends beyond the normal handover time. There have been reports, though not yet formally verified in published data, of nurses in rural hospitals working continuous twenty-four-hour shifts. The fact that these accounts circulate widely and are widely believed reflects how far the public believes the situation has deteriorated.

The misconception that nursing is a short-shift job persists in the wider public. Many people still think of nursing as a six-hour profession. While some day and evening shifts are officially 6 hours long, most nurses know that shifts rarely end on time. During my years at Teaching Hospital Karapitiya, morning shifts officially ran from seven until one in the afternoon. Because our outpatient cytotoxic therapy clinic was consistently busy, it was routine to finish patient care, clean equipment, and prepare the unit for the next day until two or three o'clock. Already physically and mentally exhausted, I would often be approached by the ward sister with the same request: could I stay for the night shift? I lived nearby. It was hard to say no, knowing that if I did, a colleague would bear the load, or patients would go without necessary care.

This meant working from seven in the morning until two in the afternoon, resting for a few hours, and then returning for a twelve-hour night shift until morning, before starting again at seven. That was not an exceptional week. For many nurses in Sri Lanka, it is simply the job as it is practiced.

During emergencies or sudden staff shortages, nurses have reported working more than twenty-four consecutive hours, taking whatever brief breaks were possible between urgent tasks. Union leaders have publicly stated that nurses work around the clock without extra pay and that the situation has become unbearable. These are not exaggerations for effect. They reflect a structural problem that has persisted for too long.

Breaks during long shifts are not guaranteed. In a busy ward, there is no protected lunch hour. Nurses eat when there is a moment to do so, often in turns, quickly, sometimes not at all. In many hospitals, no meals or tea are provided, so nurses must bring their own food, and on the worst days, even that goes uneaten. Despite this, nurses are expected to remain alert, calm, and genuinely caring toward every patient they encounter. The expectation is understandable. The conditions under which it is imposed are not.

Part 9: A Workforce in Crisis — Understanding Sri Lanka's Nurse Shortage

When visitors to government hospitals see crowded waiting areas and long delays, frustration is natural. What is less visible, and far more important to understand, is that many of these problems trace back to a single, serious structural failure: there are not enough nurses.

The numbers from 2023 tell the story clearly. Sri Lanka's public health sector has approximately 53,283 nursing officers working across 672 government hospitals, serving around 90,392 hospital beds. By density, the country has about 241.8 nurses per 100,000 people. The World Health Organization recommends a much higher ratio of combined healthcare workers, including nurses, doctors, and midwives, to achieve safe and effective care. Current estimates suggest that Sri Lanka needs an additional 24,000 to 48,000 Registered Nurses to reach staffing levels that could reasonably be described as safe.

In concrete ward terms, this shortage means nurses routinely care for far more patients than international safety standards consider appropriate. The broadly accepted benchmark for a general ward is one nurse for every five beds. In Sri Lankan government hospitals, particularly in provincial and teaching hospitals, a single nurse may be responsible for fifteen to twenty patients during the day shift, and thirty or more at night. In rural hospitals, the situation is often worse. Colleagues have described night shifts in which two or three nurses managed 70 to 90 patients, a ratio of approximately 1 nurse to 30 patients.

The question of whether patient-centred care is even conceptually possible under those conditions deserves to be asked honestly. The answer, based on both the evidence and the nurses' own experience, is that it is not. Something always gives. Most often, what gives is the less immediately urgent but genuinely important work: the patient education that should have happened but did not, the family conversation that was postponed until tomorrow, the documentation that was completed in haste. These are not trivial omissions. Over time, they accumulate into risk.

The shortage forces nurses into a constant triage, not just of patient needs but of their own attention and energy. Administering medications, checking vital signs, responding to emergencies, assisting with procedures, and answering patient calls all happen simultaneously. Over time, it becomes standard. Saying no to extra shifts becomes practically impossible because nurses know that refusing means colleagues will exceed safe limits or patients will go without care. This is not a sustainable model. It is a system that depends on its workforce making personal sacrifices to avoid a complete breakdown, and it consumes that workforce in the process.

Staff shortages also make rest and recovery nearly impossible. Many nurses work six days a week. Leave entitlements exist on paper, but in practice, taking leave is difficult

when no one is available to cover the shift. During national health emergencies, leave may be suspended altogether. Over time, the accumulated fatigue from this pattern leads to physical exhaustion, emotional burnout, and long-term health consequences that reduce a nurse's ability to work safely and effectively.

In the busiest settings, the effects of understaffing are not subtle. Emergency departments operate at full capacity for extended periods. Wards receive more patients than their physical space was designed for, with extra beds set up in corridors. Nurses are expected to remain alert, calm, and compassionate in conditions that would challenge anyone's ability to function at a professional level, let alone an exceptional one. The remarkable thing is not that this system occasionally fails its patients. The remarkable thing is how often, through the extraordinary effort of its nurses, it does not.

Part 10: Without the Tools to Heal — Medical Resources and Crumbling Infrastructure

Staff shortages alone would be enough to create a crisis in Sri Lanka's nursing system. But nurses do not work in a vacuum of personnel alone. They work with equipment, medications, and physical infrastructure. And in government hospitals across the country, each of these areas carries its own serious problems.

The economic crisis that intensified around 2022 brought these issues into sharp public focus, but the problems themselves pre-dated the crisis by years. Government hospitals had long operated with aging equipment and periodic supply shortages. What the 2022 crisis did was amplify existing fragility into acute failure. Many hospitals reported running out of essential medications: antibiotics, insulin, heart medications, and basic anesthetics. Nurses found themselves in the painful position of informing patients and families that the hospital could not provide necessary treatment and that medications would need to be purchased privately. For families already under economic stress, this was not merely inconvenient. It was devastating.

The medication shortage was accompanied by equipment failures that compounded the pressure on nursing care. Old patient monitors, limited oxygen supplies, and poorly maintained machines made even routine observation and treatment difficult. When critical equipment such as radiotherapy machines or CT scanners broke down and could not be repaired quickly, treatments were delayed. Patients waited in fear and uncertainty. Nurses, who are the professionals closest to those patients, absorbed the emotional weight of those waits as well as the clinical challenges they created.

Physical infrastructure presents its own set of challenges. Many government hospitals operate in older buildings with limited space and ward designs that were never intended to accommodate the patient volumes they now receive. Bed occupancy rates are frequently very high. Patients are sometimes placed in corridors or treated on mattresses

on the floor. In conditions like these, maintaining infection control, preserving patient privacy, and providing dignified care become tasks that require constant improvisation.

Sri Lanka relies heavily on imported medicines and medical equipment. The foreign currency shortages that accompanied the economic crisis made government procurement of these supplies extremely difficult. Prices for medical devices rose sharply. Public hospitals, with limited and often unpredictable funding, struggled to maintain even basic supply chains. Nurses working at the bedside felt this impact in the most direct possible way: supplies that had always been available were suddenly absent, and they were expected to manage somehow.

The consequence of all this is a heavier workload, intensified stress, and deepening emotional burnout among nurses. When medications are absent and equipment fails, nursing care becomes slower, more complicated, and more morally distressing. Nurses make difficult decisions knowing that patient outcomes are compromised by factors entirely beyond their control or competence. Over time, this produces what mental health researchers call moral injury: the psychological damage caused by acting, or being unable to act, in ways that violate one's professional values. A nurse who enters the profession to heal people and is then placed in a system that prevents healing suffers in ways that go beyond simple tiredness.

Meaningful improvement in this area requires substantial and sustained investment in medical supplies, physical infrastructure, equipment maintenance, and long-term system planning. Resilience, dedication, and improvisation can hold a system together for a while. They cannot substitute indefinitely for the material resources that safe healthcare requires.

Part 11: The Pay Gap — What Sri Lankan Nurses Earn and What It Costs Them

To understand what Sri Lankan nurses are paid, you must first understand what their work costs them, not in a sentimental sense, but in a practical, financial one. Nursing in Sri Lanka's government system demands long hours, significant physical strain, high emotional labour, continuous responsibility, and exposure to illness and suffering. What it returns, in financial terms, is a salary that, in most cases, does not cover the basic costs of a dignified, modern life.

Registered Nurses in Sri Lanka earn between approximately LKR 35,000 and LKR 150,000 per month, depending on experience, seniority, overtime, night-shift allowances, and other allowances. Even at the higher end, this income represents years of accumulated service, regular night shifts, and duties that go well beyond the standard working week. For a nurse at the earlier stages of their career, the base pay sits at the lower end of that range, and the gap between income and cost of living is stark.

A basic family in Sri Lanka requires at least LKR 66,000 per month to cover essential expenses, and that figure does not account for emergencies, education fees, transportation, or savings. Rent for a modest one-bedroom unit ranges from approximately LKR 15,000 to over LKR 30,000, depending on location. Utilities, food, transport, and household basics consume the rest quickly. For nurses working in Colombo or other cities, monthly living costs can easily exceed their total monthly salary. Many nurses cope by sharing housing, relying on family support, or taking out personal loans, arrangements that reflect financial vulnerability rather than financial management.

The financial pressure does not ease as nurses advance in their careers. Entry-level nurses often cannot afford independent living if they have dependents. Mid-career nurses, earning somewhat more, find that after rent, utilities, and food, very little remains for savings, emergencies, or quality-of-life improvements. Senior nurses, despite higher salaries, often report tight budgets and limited financial security. Home ownership through a mortgage is out of reach for many government nurses. High interest rates and lending requirements that assess salary against loan size effectively exclude nurses from the property market. Many end up living with family or building a home gradually over many years through slow, incremental loans.

Vehicle ownership presents additional challenges. Unlike some other government professional groups, nurses do not receive duty-free vehicle permits. With car prices reaching many millions of rupees, private transport is not a realistic option for most nurses. This affects not just comfort but practical safety: nurses working night shifts must find their own way to and from work in the early morning hours, often in areas and at times when public transport is limited.

When Sri Lankan nursing wages are compared with those in countries like Canada or Australia, the contrast is striking. An entry-level nurse in Canada can earn in a single month what a Sri Lankan government nurse earns across several months. This disparity, combined with the working conditions described throughout this series, is a powerful driver of international migration. Nurses who have invested years in training and experience look at what they earn, weigh it against what the same training would earn abroad, and make an entirely rational calculation, even when it is painful. The consequences of that calculation are felt not by the nurse who leaves, but by the colleagues and patients left behind.

Inflation adds a further dimension to this crisis. The cost of food, housing, and utilities continues to rise. Nursing salaries do not keep pace. Year by year, the real purchasing power of a nurse's income declines, even if the nominal figure on the payslip stays the same. This is not a temporary adjustment. It is a steady erosion of financial security that, over a career, produces a deep and legitimate sense of being undervalued by the system one has dedicated one's working life to serving.

A note on the figures cited here: because costs and salary scales change, and because I am not currently resident in Sri Lanka, some of these numbers may need updating. I welcome corrections from nurses and others with more current information.

Part 12: Burning Out — The Mental Health Crisis Inside Sri Lanka's Hospitals

A word that appears with increasing frequency in conversations about nursing in Sri Lanka: burnout: it is worth being precise about what this means, because burnout is not simply fatigue and is not something a good night's sleep resolves.

Burnout is the result of prolonged exposure to stress without adequate rest, support, or relief. It is characterized by emotional exhaustion, a growing sense of detachment from work, and a diminishing sense of personal accomplishment. For nurses, who are required by the nature of their work to remain present, empathetic, and alert throughout demanding shifts, burnout represents a fundamental threat to both their own well-being and the safety of their patients.

The scale of the problem in Sri Lanka is alarming. Research conducted in the period following the COVID-19 pandemic found that burnout among nurses was approximately 72.5 percent, a figure that should be understood not as a professional statistic but as a human emergency. More than seven in every ten nurses working in Sri Lanka's public hospitals are experiencing the kind of sustained exhaustion and disengagement that clinical researchers associate with serious risk to both the individual and the people they care for.

The pandemic intensified existing pressures without creating new ones. What COVID-19 did was make visible, for a brief period, what nurses had been living through for years: heavier patient loads, fear of infection, anxiety about carrying illness home to their families, and the psychological weight of caring for people who are critically ill in large numbers with limited resources. When the acute phase of the pandemic passed, the underlying conditions that had produced burnout before it remained unchanged. Staff shortages persisted. Resources remained limited. Wages did not rise to reflect the additional demands placed on the workforce.

Research on resilience among Sri Lankan nurses found that only about 28.4 percent showed a high level of resilience at work. The majority fell into moderate or low resilience categories. Resilience does not indicate personal strength or weakness in any simple sense. It describes a capacity to recover from stress, and that capacity is shaped by both individual factors and the environments people work within. When most nurses are already operating with limited resilience, and when those nurses are also facing high rates of burnout, the combination creates a serious risk of anxiety, depression, and, in extreme cases, thoughts of ending one's life.

In 2025, these pressures contributed to public demonstrations and strikes by nurses and other health workers over allowances, overtime pay and working conditions. For the public, strikes are frightening and frustrating. For nurses, they typically represent the end of a long period of feeling ignored, when routine discussions and requests have failed to produce change, and desperation has replaced patience. Not every nurse agrees with every form of protest. But the frequency of these actions is itself evidence that the underlying stress has become systemic rather than occasional.

What is almost absent from Sri Lanka's government health system is structured psychological support. Most hospitals acknowledge stress exists without providing confidential counselling, peer support programs, or clear pathways to mental health care. Nurses who struggle are expected to manage largely on their own. Private mental health care is expensive and logistically difficult to access for someone working irregular shifts. Fear of professional consequences and the cultural difficulty of discussing mental health openly keep many nurses silent about what they are experiencing.

International evidence on this point is consistent and clear. Countries that invest in mental health support for healthcare workers see measurably better outcomes: lower sick leave, higher staff retention, fewer errors, and reduced suicide risk. The World Health Organization has repeatedly identified mental well-being and fair working conditions as essential for a sustainable nursing workforce. Sri Lanka's government health system has the evidence it needs to act. What it has lacked, so far, is the will to treat nurses' mental health as the genuine patient safety issue that it is.

Part 13: The Public and the Profession — Trust, Admiration, and the Gap Between

Public perception matters enormously to the future of any profession, and nowhere more so than in healthcare, where public funding depends on public support, and public confidence affects whether people engage with the health system when they need it.

The good news for Sri Lankan nursing is that at the level of direct patient experience, respect and appreciation are genuinely strong. Former patients frequently describe their nursing care in warm terms. People remember the nurse who stayed close during a painful procedure, who adjusted a pillow in the middle of the night, who offered words of comfort when fear was at its most intense. These memories are real, and they reflect something important: nurses, at the individual level, often succeed in delivering care that genuinely matters to the people who receive it.

Over time, the public image of nursing in Sri Lanka has evolved positively. What was once viewed primarily as a caregiving role is increasingly recognized as a skilled profession requiring training, knowledge, and serious responsibility. The development of formal nursing schools and structured education pathways has contributed to this shift. The

international recognition Sri Lankan nurses receive when they work abroad reinforces the sense, among families and communities at home, that they are genuinely competent professionals.

Community-based nurses have played a particularly important role in strengthening public respect. Public health nurses who make home visits, support long-term illness management, and provide health education in communities become known and trusted over time in ways that hospital nurses, seen only during illness, may not. When a nurse visits a home, checks blood pressure, guides a family through a difficult health situation, and does it with patience and knowledge, the people in that home develop a detailed, personal understanding of what nursing actually involves. That kind of respect is earned through repeated direct experience and tends to be both deep and lasting.

Nursing's professional image reached a high point during the COVID-19 pandemic, when society collectively recognized the risks nurses were taking and the dedication they demonstrated. Many nurses found that period, for all its fear and exhaustion, also contained a powerful sense of shared purpose and public acknowledgment. It was a moment of genuine connection between the profession and the people it serves.

But that moment passed. The underlying mixed perceptions returned. And the challenge for nursing in Sri Lanka is not simply to sustain the admiration generated during a crisis, but to translate it into the kind of structural change that only comes when a profession is consistently respected, not just celebrated in emergencies.

Part 14: Stereotypes, Strikes, and the Complicated Truth About Public Opinion

Honest discussion of public perception requires acknowledging the negative alongside the positive, not to assign blame, but because the full picture is more useful than a partial one.

In crowded government hospitals, where patients and families are stressed, tired, and frightened, nurses often become the focal point for frustrations that stem from the system around them. Long waits, inadequate resources, and overcrowded wards produce experiences that some people describe as encounters with nurses who were short-tempered, unhelpful, or difficult to approach. Over time, individual experiences accumulate into a generalized image of the stern government nurse. This image does real damage to the profession's public standing and to the morale of nurses who care deeply about their work.

What this image consistently fails to account for is context. A nurse who has been on her feet for 12 hours, managing 20 patients, with no proper meal break and colleagues absent due to the nursing shortage, is not the same person as a nurse working in a well-staffed,

well-resourced ward with reasonable patient ratios. Both are professional nurses. The conditions under which they work are entirely different, and those conditions shape every interaction.

The question of strikes is particularly charged. When nurses engage in industrial action, public opinion divides sharply. Some people express anger, understanding strikes as a betrayal of the duty of care that nursing implies. Others express empathy, recognizing that strikes typically follow long periods during which legitimate concerns have been ignored through official channels. Both responses reflect something real. Strikes do affect patients, and that matters. They also arise from genuine grievance, and that matters too. A public discourse that acknowledges only one of these truths is doing a disservice to the complexity of the situation.

Gender stereotypes continue to complicate how nursing is perceived. The persistent association of nursing with femininity and caregiving instinct, rather than with professional skill and clinical knowledge, affects how both nurses and patients understand the profession. Male nurses face particular challenges in this regard. I recall that when my aunt suggested nursing as a career during my school years, my immediate reaction was dismissive: I described it as a female job and said it was not for me. That reaction, looking back, says everything about how deeply these stereotypes are embedded in Sri Lankan culture. Once I entered nursing and began to understand what the work actually entailed, those attitudes dissolved completely. But the fact that they existed so strongly in the first place reveals a cultural problem that has direct consequences for recruitment, retention, and professional identity.

The idea of nurses as heroes deserves scrutiny, too. During the pandemic, being called a hero felt meaningful to many nurses. But heroism, as a social narrative, can also function as a way of normalizing abnormal conditions. If nurses are heroes, then sacrifice is expected of them, and the conditions that necessitate sacrifice do not need to change. Genuine respect for nursing must ultimately express itself not in applause or social media tributes, but in policies that reflect the actual value of nursing work. Fair wages, adequate staffing, professional support structures, and inclusion in healthcare decision-making: these are the expressions of respect that a profession needs to thrive.

Part 15: Raising the Bar — Why Nursing Education Must Move to Degree Level

Sri Lanka's nursing profession stands at a turning point. The challenges described throughout this series, staffing shortages, burnout, inadequate wages, and weak professional infrastructure, do not have simple solutions. But some reforms can address multiple problems simultaneously, and nursing education is one of them.

The proposal to require a Bachelor of Science in Nursing as the standard entry qualification for Registered Nurses is not a new idea globally. It is, in fact, the established standard in many of the countries whose healthcare systems are most admired. Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Sweden all require a bachelor's degree to become a Registered Nurse. These programs combine science, ethics, communication, clinical training, and leadership development to prepare nurses for the increasingly complex healthcare environments in which they will work.

I understand that this proposal can generate strong reactions. Experienced diploma nurses who have spent careers providing excellent care in difficult conditions, and who have personally upheld this system through wars, disasters, and pandemics, may reasonably ask why the benchmark is being moved now. This concern deserves a direct and honest response. Raising the entry standard is not a judgment on the nurses who qualified under the previous system. It is a recognition that healthcare is changing, and that the profession must change with it. Patients are more informed and more complex. Treatments are more sophisticated. The legal and ethical landscape is more demanding. Preparing nurses for this environment requires more than the current training provides.

A transition to degree-level entry should be managed carefully, gradually, and respectfully. Current diploma nurses should be able to continue working safely and confidently, with bridge programs available for those who wish to upgrade their qualifications. A clear target year, such as 2030, by which all new Registered Nurses entering government service must hold a degree, would give nursing schools, universities, and the Ministry of Health time to develop the necessary infrastructure. Existing nursing schools could be repurposed for bridge programs, continuing education, caregiver training, or preparation for the international workforce.

The long-term benefits of this shift extend beyond clinical competence. When nursing moves into the university system as a degree-level profession, society's perception of it changes. Young people consider career trajectories more seriously. The profession attracts candidates who see in it a genuine path for intellectual and professional growth. Degree-qualified nurses are better positioned to pursue postgraduate study, specialization, and leadership roles. In countries where nursing has advanced to the master's and doctoral levels, nurse practitioners who can diagnose, prescribe, and manage patients independently have helped reduce pressure on doctors and improve access to care, particularly in rural and underserved communities.

Sri Lanka has the foundation to build this future. What it requires is the political and institutional will to commit to it.

Part 16: Regulation That Protects — The Case for Proper Licensure

Becoming a Registered Nurse in Sri Lanka currently involves completing a diploma or a bachelor's degree and submitting the qualification to the Sri Lanka Nursing Council for registration. Once that registration is granted, it is valid for life. There is no requirement to renew it, no regular assessment of ongoing competence, and no mechanism to verify that a nurse has remained clinically active or professionally current. Unless a nurse retires or leaves the profession voluntarily, the registration stands unchanged.

This model may appear administratively simple. In practice, it represents a significant weakness in the professional framework of Sri Lankan nursing, affecting nurse accountability, patient safety, and the international recognition of Sri Lankan nursing qualifications.

A more robust system would clearly distinguish between registration and licensure. Registration confirms that a nurse has completed an approved nursing education program and met the basic entry requirements. It would be a permanent record of that achievement. Licensure, by contrast, is the legal authorization to practice nursing and must be renewed annually.

Annual license renewal would require nurses to demonstrate continuing practice and professional development: a minimum number of practice hours, completion of approved continuing education, evidence of competency, and valid professional liability insurance. A public online registry would allow anyone to search a nurse's registration number and confirm that they hold a current, valid license to practice. This is not an intrusive or punitive mechanism. It is the standard in healthcare systems that take professional accountability seriously, and it benefits nurses as much as it protects patients.

Currently, Sri Lanka has no mandatory licensure enforcement in public healthcare settings. There is no routine credential verification and no structured system for transparently managing professional conduct. This gap has real consequences. It limits the professional standing of Sri Lankan nurses in international markets. It reduces public confidence in a system where accountability is invisible. And it leaves nurses themselves without the clear professional identity that a robust regulatory framework provides.

The solution is the establishment of an independent Sri Lanka Nursing and Midwifery Regulatory Council with clear legal authority, strong nurse representation, and complete operational separation from hospital service providers. This body would maintain a public register of licensed nurses with defined scopes of practice, develop national competency standards aligned with international frameworks, manage background and character checks, require professional liability insurance, and handle complaints and disciplinary processes fairly and transparently. Building this institution would be a defining step in transforming nursing from a loosely regulated occupation into a fully accountable profession.

Part 17: Learning That Never Stops — The Case for Mandatory Professional Development

When I was a practicing nurse in Sri Lanka, continuing education was something that happened informally, if it happened at all. We learned from experience. We absorbed knowledge from senior colleagues. We read when we had time, which was rarely. What we did not have was a structured, mandatory professional development system that required us to regularly update our knowledge and demonstrate that our practice remained current and evidence-based.

This is not just a personal observation. It reflects a systemic gap that has real consequences for the quality and safety of nursing care.

Consider Basic Life Support. During nursing school, we learned CPR and first aid, with some practical training. After qualification, there was no accredited refresher system, no mandatory recertification, no requirement to demonstrate BLS competence every one or two years, as is standard in many other countries. Some nurses working in intensive care or emergency settings may have had access to additional training, but there was no national requirement and no systematic approach. The same gap existed in other critical areas. We cared for patients who were traumatized or mentally unwell without ever receiving structured training in trauma-informed care after nursing school. We managed aggressive or distressed patients without formal training in nonviolent crisis intervention. We managed these situations through experience and instinct, which is a testament to the adaptability of Sri Lankan nurses, but is not an acceptable substitute for proper training in a modern healthcare system.

Mandatory Continuing Professional Development, or CPD, is the established response to this problem in most developed healthcare systems. The concern that Sri Lanka cannot afford such a system is understandable but not persuasive. Countries with significantly fewer resources than Sri Lanka have successfully implemented effective and affordable CPD frameworks. Bangladesh provides one example. CPD programs do not need to be expensive or inaccessible. They can be delivered through online modules, workplace workshops, and peer learning groups. The key is that they are structured, recorded, verified, and connected to license renewal.

A good CPD framework for Sri Lankan nurses would cover evidence-based practice updates, clinical skill refreshers, ethical and legal knowledge, quality improvement methods, basic digital and health technology literacy, communication and teamwork, and specialty-specific learning. If properly designed, CPD also aligns with the licensure reform described in the previous part: to renew a license each year, a nurse must demonstrate completion of required CPD hours and meet practice standards. The two systems reinforce each other.

The benefits extend beyond individual nurses. When nurses remain current in their knowledge and skills, patient safety improves. When CPD is structured and verified, it

builds public confidence in the profession. When continuing education becomes part of nursing's professional culture, it changes how nurses see themselves and how the wider healthcare system sees them. Nursing becomes not just a job one qualifies for once, but a profession that demands and rewards ongoing intellectual engagement. That shift matters for recruitment, for retention, and for the quality of care that Sri Lanka's patients receive.

Part 18: A Fair Wage at Every Stage — Rethinking the Nursing Salary Structure

Discussing nurse salaries in Sri Lanka requires more than citing a single figure. Nurses at different stages of their careers carry different levels of responsibility, experience, and leadership. A meaningful salary reform must acknowledge these differences and reflect them in a clear, transparent, and consistent pay structure.

Before proposing specific figures, it is important to acknowledge the political and structural complexity of wage negotiations in Sri Lanka's nursing sector. Currently, salary increases and conditions of service are typically sought through multiple politically affiliated trade unions, a fragmentation that tends to produce division, short-term gains, and reactive negotiations rather than the kind of strategic, evidence-based advocacy that produces lasting improvement. The ideal long-term goal is a unified professional nursing body that represents all Registered Nurses regardless of political affiliation, and that negotiates based on workforce data, patient safety evidence, and international benchmarks. Without this unity, salary reform risks being captured by short-term politics rather than guided by professional principle.

With that context, here is what a fair and realistic salary structure for Sri Lankan Registered Nurses might look like, based on comparisons with countries of similar economic scale and inflation trajectories.

Newly graduated nurses face the steepest learning curve of their careers. They are applying clinical theory in complex real environments for the first time, managing shift work, and building the professional confidence that comes only through experience. At this stage, a base salary of approximately LKR 90,000 to 100,000 per month would allow them to meet basic living costs, afford transport and meals, and focus on developing their skills without the added pressure of financial crisis. When new nurses are paid too little, the result is immediate pressure to take on overtime, which accelerates the burnout that drives early-career departure from the profession.

After three to five years, nurses take on significantly more responsibility. They manage complex patients more independently, support junior colleagues, and handle higher-acuity workloads with less supervision. A salary of approximately LKR 100,000 to 120,000 per month at this stage reflects that growth and provides the financial stability that mid-

career nurses need to sustain family responsibilities without considering migration. These years are critical: it is often during this period that the decision to stay in Sri Lanka or leave for better-paid work abroad is made.

Nurses with five to ten years of experience are often the informal backbone of hospital wards. They respond calmly to emergencies, mentor junior staff, and maintain standards under pressure, drawing on accumulated knowledge and clinical judgment that cannot be quickly replaced. A salary range of LKR 120,000 to 130,000 per month for this group would help reduce the financial incentive to migrate that currently affects many nurses at this career stage.

Senior nurses, ward sisters, charge nurses, and nurse managers carry the heaviest leadership responsibilities. They are accountable for entire ward units, staffing decisions, documentation quality, conflict resolution, and the safety of both patients and junior staff. These roles require not only clinical expertise but also leadership skills, systems thinking, and emotional resilience. Compensation in the range of LKR 130,000 to 160,000 or more, depending on unit size, specialization, and responsibility level, would appropriately reflect this.

When Sri Lanka is compared with countries of similar economic size and inflation, nurses elsewhere typically earn between 300 and 430 US dollars per month or more. A salary structure ranging from LKR 100,000 to 160,000 keeps Sri Lanka within a comparable range while treating nurses as the skilled professionals they are. Critically, these figures should represent base salaries achieved through normal work, not amounts nurses reach only by working constant overtime and accumulating night shift allowances.

A clear and transparent salary ladder also sends an important message to young people considering a career in nursing. It demonstrates that nursing is a profession with a genuine future, not a dead-end job that requires sacrificing financial well-being indefinitely. When people see that nursing offers career progression, recognition, and stability, the profession becomes more attractive, strengthening the pipeline of future nurses.

Part 19: Protection in Practice — Why Professional Liability Insurance Is No Longer Optional

Nursing is a profession in which the consequences of error, or even the allegation of error, can be life-changing. A medication mistake that harms a patient, a delay in observation attributed to negligence, an incomplete nursing note cited in a legal complaint: these situations are not hypothetical. They occur in healthcare systems worldwide, including Sri Lanka's.

When they happen in Sri Lanka, a nurse without professional liability insurance faces those situations essentially alone. Legal costs, including lawyers' fees, expert opinions, and court expenses, can accumulate to amounts that represent years of a nurse's salary. If a court awards damages to a patient or family, the financial burden can be catastrophic for someone earning a modest government wage. And because nurses are the professionals most continuously present with patients, they often become the most visible target when something goes wrong in a ward, even when the underlying cause is a systemic failure of staffing, resources, or equipment that no individual nurse created.

Professional liability insurance, also known as malpractice insurance, addresses this vulnerability. It covers legal defence costs, provides access to lawyers who understand healthcare specifically, and can assist with compensation payments if a court requires them. It also provides support during hospital investigations and complaints to professional regulatory authorities. This is not merely financial protection. It is professional protection, the assurance that a nurse's career and reputation can be defended properly if they are called into question.

As public awareness of patient rights grows in Sri Lanka, the frequency of legal actions relating to healthcare is increasing. Nurses can be named in complaints covering medication errors, care delays, communication failures, or incomplete documentation. In overcrowded wards, with too few staff and insufficient resources, the conditions exist for these situations to arise despite a nurse's best efforts. When families are distressed and seeking explanations, the nurse closest to the patient is often the person they hold responsible, regardless of where the actual failure occurred within the system.

Hospital insurance typically protects the institution rather than the individual nurse. When decisions are made about legal strategy, institutional interests and individual nurse interests do not always align. Without personal professional insurance, a nurse has no independent voice in that process. With it, a nurse has a genuine defence that is focused entirely on their own professional situation.

There is also a less obvious but important quality improvement benefit. When professional liability claims are reviewed and analyzed, patterns emerge about common risk points in clinical practice. These insights are used to improve education, strengthen documentation practices, and enhance patient safety systems. In a healthcare environment where resources for safety improvement are limited, learning from adverse events is one of the most cost-effective tools available.

Implementing a professional liability insurance scheme for Sri Lankan nurses does not require each nurse to manage an expensive individual policy. In many countries, group insurance linked to professional registration is offered at very low cost, with government support keeping premiums affordable. This is a practical and achievable reform that would significantly improve both nurse protection and the integrity of the profession. For a workforce that already carries so much risk in difficult conditions, this protection is long overdue.

Part 20: The 5 Percent Question — Gender Equity and the Male Nursing Quota

Only about 5 percent of Registered Nurses in Sri Lanka's government service are male. That figure alone raises a question worth examining carefully: is this a natural reflection of social preferences, or is it the result of a deliberate policy that excludes capable candidates from a profession that desperately needs more of them?

The answer, it turns out, is the latter. In 2013, Gazette Notification 1837/8 formalized what had previously been an informal practice, legally establishing that no more than 5 percent of total nursing recruitments could be male. This is not a flexible guideline. It is a hard ceiling. Even when hospitals are critically understaffed and qualified male candidates are available, that ceiling holds.

The justifications that are typically offered for this policy centre on patient comfort, particularly the supposed discomfort of female patients being cared for by male nurses. These justifications do not withstand scrutiny. Male doctors in Sri Lanka routinely examine, treat, and perform intimate procedures with female patients. This is accepted without controversy. Male nurses caring for female patients with the same professionalism and the same patient consent mechanisms should require no greater justification.

As a male Registered Nurse who has worked in gynecology and obstetrics operating theatres, oncology units, and general medical and surgical wards, I can say directly that in my experience, female patients do not object to care from male nurses when that care is delivered with respect, clear communication, and appropriate boundaries. The assumption that they do is a cultural projection, not an evidence-based finding.

During nursing school, the difference in treatment was evident. While female students attended gynecology and obstetrics lectures and clinical training as a normal part of their curriculum, male students were often redirected to other subjects or placements. The message conveyed, even before formal policy enshrined it, was that male nurses were partial members of the profession, welcome in some areas but excluded from others by default.

The international evidence on gender diversity in nursing is clear and consistent. Countries that recruit on merit without gender restrictions, including Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, have male nursing populations ranging from 9 to 13 percent of the workforce. These numbers arose naturally when barriers were removed, not through affirmative quotas favouring men. In some countries and some specialties, particularly emergency care, intensive care, trauma, and mental health, male nurses are proportionally more represented because those environments attract them. For Sri Lanka,

which faces significant demand pressure in exactly these high-acuity settings, excluding men from nursing based on an outdated policy is counterproductive.

Bangladesh's experience provides a cautionary parallel. A similar male quota was introduced there, and over time, male participation declined sharply as social stigma increased and talented candidates were lost to other professions. Researchers found that the quota actively harmed nursing education and the workforce. Notably, Bangladesh does not impose gender quotas on medical school admissions, making the nursing quota a direct contradiction of the merit-based principles applied to the rest of the health professional pipeline.

From a human rights and policy standpoint, the quota also puts Sri Lanka in conflict with its own international commitments to gender equality and non-discrimination. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and World Health Organization guidance both call for removing barriers to equal participation in healthcare work. A policy that blocks employment based on gender is a barrier, regardless of which gender it restricts.

The solution is straightforward and evidence-based: merit-based recruitment without gender restrictions, combined with active efforts to address the cultural barriers that discourage male applicants through education, mentorship, and strong anti-discrimination policies in nursing schools and workplaces. Nursing is about care, clinical knowledge, and professional responsibility. None of these qualities is distributed by gender. Sri Lanka's nursing shortage is real and urgent. Excluding any qualified candidate based on gender is a policy that the country can no longer afford.

Part 21: Someone to Talk To — The Case for Employee Assistance Programs

"Ayiya, I cannot handle this anymore. It is too much at work, and at home, I have no support. I want to sleep for weeks."

I have lost count of how many colleagues shared words like these with me during my years of nursing in Sri Lanka. Some were under severe financial pressure. Others were dealing with difficult family situations. Many needed someone who would listen without judgment or consequences. In a profession built on the ability to listen and support others, the absence of that support for nurses themselves is a profound and damaging irony.

The reality of Sri Lankan nursing is one of accumulating weight. Long shifts, high patient loads, exposure to suffering and death, financial stress, family responsibilities, and a cultural expectation of quiet endurance combine to create conditions in which mental health support is not a luxury but a clinical necessity. Over 70 percent of Sri Lankan nurses experience significant burnout. Fewer than one in three demonstrate high

resilience at work. These are not statistics about weak individuals. They are measurements of a system that has exceeded its human capacity without providing the support structures necessary to sustain it.

A well-designed Employee Assistance Program, or EAP, addresses this directly. An EAP is a structured support service available to all employees, typically at no cost to the individual, that provides access to confidential counselling, mental health resources, practical guidance, and crisis support. It is not a substitute for structural reform. No amount of counselling makes chronic understaffing acceptable. But an EAP provides the immediate human support that nurses need while systemic change is pursued.

The EAP available to my wife and me in the country where we now work has been genuinely valuable. During the COVID period, when stress levels were extreme, and the psychological toll of healthcare work was acute, it provided confidential access to trained counsellors, support for work-life balance challenges, family and relationship guidance, and crisis assistance. All of this was available by phone, app, or in person, at any time, without any requirement to justify the need or fear professional consequences for accessing it.

A Sri Lankan EAP would need to be culturally adapted, available in Sinhala, Tamil, and English, and designed to be accessible to nurses working irregular shifts and in rural locations. Online and phone-based services are particularly important for nurses who cannot easily travel to a counselling centre between a day shift and a night shift. Peer support groups, structured and facilitated rather than informal, offer another evidence-based approach, because nurses often feel best understood by other nurses who share the same working reality.

Stress management and emotional coping skills should also be embedded in nursing education and professional development, not as additional burdens but as core professional competencies. Mindfulness, grounding techniques, and structured reflection are not soft add-ons. They are evidence-based tools that improve functioning under stress, reduce burnout risk, and enhance the quality of care nurses provide.

When burnout is identified, the response must be supportive rather than punitive. Temporary workload adjustments, mentoring arrangements, or short rotations to less acute settings can allow nurses to recover while remaining in the profession. Early support prevents the complete exit from nursing that burnout, left unaddressed, often produces.

International evidence consistently shows that EAPs generate a return on investment within a few years through reduced sick leave, lower staff turnover, fewer clinical errors, and improved morale. But beyond the economics, caring for nurses' mental health is simply an ethical obligation. A health system that asks its workers to care for the most vulnerable people in society, under conditions of chronic stress and inadequate support, has a responsibility to ensure those workers are not destroyed in the process.

Part 22: The Numbers Do Not Lie — Nurse-Patient Ratios and the Safety Crisis

There is a simple, measurable way to evaluate whether a nursing system is safe, and Sri Lanka's system does not meet the standard.

According to data from the Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka has approximately 53,000 Registered Nurses serving a population of about 22 million. This gives a density of roughly 2.4 nurses per 1,000 people, or 24 per 10,000. The World Health Organization recommends a minimum of 27 nurses per 10,000 people. It sets a target of at least 44.5 combined healthcare workers, including doctors, nurses, and midwives, per 10,000 people to achieve universal health coverage. On both measures, Sri Lanka falls short.

The ward-level picture is even starker. Sri Lanka has approximately 90,000 hospital beds and just over 53,000 nurses. On paper, this suggests 0.6 nurses per bed. But this calculation does not account for shift patterns, leave, training time, or non-bedside duties. When realistic shift coverage is factored in, providing safe twenty-four-hour care for one bed typically requires close to one full-time nurse. By this measure, Sri Lanka is short by an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 nurses, a figure consistent with several independent workforce analyses.

In general, wards of busy provincial and teaching hospitals: a single nurse routinely manages 15 to 20 patients during the day shift and 30 or more at night. Colleagues working in rural hospitals have described night shifts with two or three nurses responsible for 70 to 90 patients, a ratio of approximately 1 nurse to 30 patients. For comparison, India's recommended standard for general wards is 1 nurse per 6 patients. High-income countries aim for one nurse for four patients in medical and surgical settings, with one-on-one nursing in intensive care units. The gap between international standards and Sri Lanka's reality is not marginal. It is vast.

These ratios have measurable effects on patient safety. Research consistently links high nurse-patient ratios to increased rates of medication errors, missed patient deterioration, infections, falls, and mortality. A nurse responsible for 30 patients during a night shift cannot provide the level of observation needed to allow early recognition of a deteriorating patient. No amount of skill or dedication changes this arithmetic. When one person can only be in one place at a time, patients in the other twenty-nine beds wait.

Migration trends add urgency to the numbers. Some studies report that over 80 percent of surveyed Sri Lankan nurses have considered or are actively pursuing migration. If current conditions remain unchanged, Sri Lanka risks losing thousands of experienced nurses over the next five to ten years. The cycle is already operating. Nurse shortages lead to heavier workloads, which lead to burnout, which drives resignations and migration, which worsens shortages. Breaking the cycle requires setting concrete, measurable national targets.

Even a short-term goal of reducing ward ratios from one nurse for twenty or thirty patients to one nurse for ten would represent a meaningful safety improvement. Progressively moving toward ratios of 1:6 or 1:8 would align Sri Lanka with regional standards. These targets require more nurses, which requires investment in education, recruitment, and retention. They also require removing the unnecessary barriers that currently exclude qualified candidates, including the gender quota discussed in the previous part, and implementing the salary and working condition reforms that make nursing a viable long-term career choice.

The numbers tell a clear and actionable story. Sri Lanka's nurse-patient ratio crisis is real, measurable, and solvable. Solving it will require commitment and resources. Not solving it will cost lives.

Part 23: The Uniform Question — Scrubs, Safety, and Professional Identity

Of all the topics in this series, this one may seem the least urgent. Uniforms, surely, are a minor concern compared with staffing shortages and burnout. But the uniform question is worth serious examination because it touches on infection control, physical safety, professional identity, and daily comfort, with real effects on a nurse's ability to do their job well.

My wife mentions it after long shifts: the heat, the restriction of movement, the impracticality of a uniform that was not designed for the physical demands of modern ward nursing. When she describes the discomfort, she is referring to something that compounds the fatigue of already demanding work and could be improved with relatively modest effort and investment.

The core problem in Sri Lanka is not that the current uniform is poorly designed. There is no clear, measurable national standard. Many facilities operate with vague requirements around white uniform and neat appearance, without specifying fabric quality, ergonomic design, laundering standards, or professional identification requirements. This vagueness produces inequality between hospitals, complicates infection control because different fabrics have different resistance to disinfection, and creates additional administrative friction for nurses who are already managing significant workload pressure.

A standardized scrub system offers the most practical solution and is broadly consistent with global practice. A good scrub design has fewer folds and fewer areas where contamination can accumulate compared with more complex uniform styles. Clear national guidelines should specify that uniforms can withstand thermal disinfection at 65 degrees Celsius or higher without fabric degradation, that they must be changed at every shift or immediately if visibly contaminated, and that laundering should ideally be done by

the hospital or through a contracted professional service that controls temperature and maintains separation between clean and soiled items.

Fabric standards matter. A durable, breathable polyester-cotton blend is the most practical choice for the Sri Lankan climate: it holds up well to repeated washing, dries quickly in humid conditions, and provides the stretch and mobility that ward nursing requires. Footwear standards should specify closed-toe, non-slip shoes, because slip injuries and sharp object injuries are among the most common occupational risks in clinical environments. Grooming standards related to infection control, including short nails and minimal jewellery, should be clearly articulated as part of the professional standard rather than left to individual interpretation.

Professional identification is part of the uniform question and deserves specific attention. In a busy hospital where many staff members are moving around simultaneously, clear, visible ID badges showing names, registration numbers, titles, and ward units help patients and families quickly identify who they are speaking with. This reduces confusion, builds trust, and supports the public's perception of nursing's professional identity.

Once the basics of fabric quality, consistent design, reliable laundering, and strong identification are in place, colour-coding by department becomes a straightforward enhancement. Many healthcare systems use colour to help patients and visitors navigate the clinical environment and distinguish between different professional roles. Sri Lanka could introduce this in phases, beginning with the foundational standards and adding colour differentiation as the system matures.

This reform is achievable, relatively low-cost compared with the other changes this series has proposed and would make a genuine daily difference to the working lives of nurses. In a system stretched thin by shortages and stress, improving what can be improved, even in practical and logistical ways, sends an important message: nurses matter, their comfort and safety matter, and the system is paying attention.

Part 24: Twenty Steps Forward — A Practical Reform Agenda for Sri Lankan Nursing

Throughout this series, we have covered the realities of Sri Lankan nursing from many angles: the daily demands of the work, the structural pressures of understaffing and inadequate resources, the financial strain of low wages, the psychological burden of burnout, the gaps in education, regulation, and professional support, and the cultural and policy barriers that prevent the profession from reaching its full potential.

What follows is a practical reform agenda: 20 specific steps grounded in the evidence and experiences discussed throughout these posts and adaptable to Sri Lanka's culture,

values, and economic context. These are not aspirational slogans. They are concrete actions with established precedent in healthcare systems worldwide.

1. **Increase healthcare spending beyond 3.5 percent of GDP.**

   Adequate funding is the foundation of every other reform. Without it, improvements to staffing, equipment, salaries, and working conditions remain theoretical.

2. **Establish a professional liability insurance scheme for all Registered Nurses.**

   Legal and professional protection for nurses is essential for safe practice and professional confidence.

3. **Remove the 5 percent male nursing quota.**

   Nursing should be open to all genders based on merit. The quota lacks evidence and is actively harmful to a profession facing critical shortages.

4. **Create a single, unified professional nursing union.**

   A united voice enables fair, evidence-based negotiation rather than fragmented, politically driven industrial action.

5. **Legally limit compulsory overtime and guarantee rest periods.**

   Fatigued nurses cannot provide safe care. Mandatory rest protections are a patient-safety measure as much as a worker-welfare one.

6. **Introduce Employee Assistance Programs for healthcare staff.**

   Mental health and emotional support are professional necessities, not optional benefits, in a high-stress healthcare environment.

7. **Implement structured mentoring for newly qualified nurses.**

   Proper professional guidance during the early career period reduces burnout and improves patient safety.

8. **Modernize nursing uniforms to international standards.**

   Comfort, infection control, and professional identification should be built into uniform policy rather than left to individual interpretation.

9. **Establish a strict registration and annual licensure system.**

   Lifelong registration without competency review is inadequate for a modern healthcare profession. Annual licensure renewal creates accountability and public trust.

10. **Publish a transparent salary scale based on global benchmarks.**

    Clear and fair pay structures, aligned with the responsibilities at each career stage, improve motivation and reduce migration.

11. **Mandate annual Continuing Professional Development.**

    Ongoing learning keeps nurses safe, up to date, and professionally confident.

12. **Develop recognized specialty nursing certifications.**

    Specialization improves care quality, provides career progression, and strengthens the nursing workforce in high-acuity settings.

13. **Create a public registry of Registered Nurses.**

    Transparency builds public trust and supports accountability.

14. **Transition nursing education to bachelor's degree entry.**

    This aligns Sri Lanka with global standards, strengthens clinical competence, and elevates the professional status of nursing.

15. **Improve nurse-to-bed ratios through phased planning.**

    Safe staffing levels reduce errors, protect nurses from exhaustion, and are the single most direct intervention available to improve patient outcomes.

16. **Establish a strong anti-discrimination policy.**

    Every nurse deserves respect and equal opportunity regardless of gender, ethnicity, or background.

17. **Create retention incentive programs.**

    Keeping experienced nurses in service is more effective and less costly than continuously recruiting new staff.

18. **Develop international credential recognition agreements.**

    Supporting the global mobility of Sri Lankan nurses while raising domestic standards serves both individual nurses and the profession's international standing.

19. **Implement a national workforce development and recruitment plan.**

    Planned staffing prevents the shortages and uneven geographic distribution that currently leave rural hospitals most vulnerable.

20. **Promote evidence-based nursing practice nationwide.**

    Clinical decisions guided by research rather than habit lead to better patient outcomes and a stronger professional culture.

Part 25: Caring for Those Who Care — A Call to Action for Sri Lankan Nursing

We have come a long way together through this series. From the cancer ward at two in the morning, where my wife and I once cared for ninety patients between the two of us, to the policy frameworks and professional reforms that evidence from around the world shows can genuinely improve nursing, this has been a journey through the reality of a profession that Sri Lanka depends on entirely but supports inadequately.

Let me be direct about what the evidence shows. Sri Lanka's government-registered nurses are performing an extraordinary service under conditions that, by any reasonable international standard, are unsafe. They are doing so with dedication, resilience, and a commitment to their patients that is genuinely remarkable. But dedication is not a policy. Resilience is not a substitute for adequate staffing. And commitment cannot indefinitely sustain a workforce that is burning out, migrating in large numbers, and working without the professional infrastructure that their counterparts in other countries take for granted.

The reforms proposed in this series are not radical. They are evidence-based, internationally tested, and adaptable to Sri Lanka's specific cultural and economic context. They require political will, coordinated planning, and sustained investment. They also require something perhaps more difficult: a genuine shift in how Sri Lanka thinks about nursing, not as a service role, not as a vocation that justifies sacrifice without reciprocation, not as a profession whose members should be grateful to have meaningful work. But it is a skilled, accountable, regulated, and fairly compensated profession without which the public health system cannot function.

The barriers to reform are real. Some within the medical establishment may resist changes that strengthen nursing's professional autonomy and voice. Budget constraints are genuine and cannot be dismissed. Implementation capacity must be built gradually. And within nursing itself, the fragmentation of trade union representation has historically limited the profession's ability to speak with the coherent, evidence-based voice that produces lasting policy change.

But none of these barriers is insurmountable. The international evidence on what works is clear. Sri Lanka has the human capital: its nurses are recognized worldwide for their competence and dedication. What is needed is the institutional will to build a system that honours that quality rather than consuming it.

When nurses are supported, valued, and protected, patient care improves. When nurse-patient ratios reach safe levels, errors decrease. When nurses are paid fairly, the migration drain slows. When professional development is mandatory and supported, clinical standards rise. When mental health services are available, burnout is caught earlier and treated rather than ignored until it destroys a career. These are not abstract aspirations. They are measurable outcomes with established precedent.

To the nurses reading this: your work is seen. The shift that ran three hours over because no one came to relieve you, the medication round completed meticulously despite exhaustion, the family you stayed with for an extra few minutes because they were frightened and alone, the small dignities you preserved for patients who had lost most others: these things matter, and they matter to the people who received them in ways they may never be able to express fully.

To policymakers, health administrators, union leaders, and members of the public: the system that Sri Lanka's nurses are holding together is not sustainable in its current form. The twenty practical reforms outlined in this series represent a realistic path toward a

nursing profession that is safer, stronger, and more dignified. Implementing them will require commitment, coordination, and resources. Not implementing them will cost more, in human terms, than any budget can quantify.

"Caring for those who care for us" is not merely a slogan. It is a description of the most basic obligation that a health system has to the workforce it depends upon. Sri Lanka's Registered Nurses have cared for this country through floods, pandemics, economic crises, and the ordinary emergencies of millions of ordinary lives. The time has come to care for them in return.

About the Author

The author is a former Registered Nurse who worked in Sri Lanka's government health system for approximately fourteen years. He now works as a health professional in a Western country and has 30 years of experience in healthcare systems across three countries.

All statistics cited in this series are drawn from official government publications, peer-reviewed research, and international health body reports, including the Sri Lanka Ministry of Health Annual Health Bulletin 2023 and World Health Organization workforce guidelines.