

CELEBRATING COMMONWEALTH DAY

The second Monday in March is Commonwealth Day. Its purpose is to promote understanding about global issues, international co-operation and the work of the modern Commonwealth. Each year a different theme is chosen for Commonwealth Day. The Head of the Commonwealth, Queen Elizabeth II and the Commonwealth Secretary-General both issue statements on the theme.

What is the Commonwealth?

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 53 independent member countries - from Africa to Asia, from the Pacific to the Caribbean, from Europe to North America. The Commonwealth includes some of the world's biggest countries and some of its smallest; some of the richest countries and some of the poorest. The Commonwealth is often called a family of nations and peoples. Its special strength lies in the combination of the diversity of its members and their shared inheritance in language, culture and the rule of law.

There are about 1.7 billion people in the Commonwealth. That is more than a quarter (29.8%) of the world's population. About half of the Commonwealth people are young people under 25 years old. Any person who is a citizen of a Commonwealth country can be called a Commonwealth citizen. He or she is part of the unique Commonwealth family.

What does the Commonwealth do?

Commonwealth countries work together to build a better world for themselves. They help each other to make their economies stronger, to improve their systems of government and to enhance the skills of their people.

In particular, the Commonwealth:

- promotes democracy and good governance, sustainable economic and social development, respect for human rights and the rule of law, gender equality and protection of the environment,
- promotes partnership and co-operation among its members,
- promotes understanding and tolerance among its citizens, and
- reduces prejudice, ignorance, disease and poverty.

With English as a common working language and similar systems of law, public administration and education, the Commonwealth has become a vibrant and growing association of states in tune with the modern world.

The Commonwealth Heads of Government meet every two years. The Commonwealth Health Ministers meet annually in Geneva, Switzerland prior to meetings of the World Health Assembly. The policies and programmes decided at these meetings are implemented through the Commonwealth Secretariat in London.

Non-government Organisations

Ordinary people are very important in the Commonwealth family. In addition to governments many professional and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) work to improve the lives of Commonwealth people. They do so in such areas as education, housing, sanitation and health. There are over 60 Commonwealth NGOs of which the Commonwealth Nurses Federation is one. Others are the

Commonwealth Medical Association, the Commonwealth Pharmaceutical Association and the Commonwealth Dental Association.

What is Commonwealth Day?

Commonwealth Day, the second Monday in March, is when members of the 53 countries of the Commonwealth celebrate their links with each other. Many cities host multi-faith observance services. The largest is held in London at Westminster Abbey, where the Queen's Commonwealth Day message is read by the Secretary-General. The message is also distributed throughout the Commonwealth and broadcast by the BBC world service. Parliaments and legislatures mark the day with speeches and events. Other celebrations include receptions, sports tournaments and concerts.

What can nurses do to celebrate Commonwealth Day?

National Nurses Associations are encouraged to give consideration to holding a suitable activity on Commonwealth Day.

Associations may hold an activity both to support the Commonwealth Day theme and to confirm their stature as visible and dynamic organisations, which are proactive politically and professionally. There are many ways to celebrate Commonwealth Day and the opportunity can be taken to impart some valuable knowledge and skill at the same time. National nurses associations may wish to consider arranging an activity around a particular theme such as:

- the diversity in health care provision,
- the ways governments, organisations and people can work together to improve health services provision,
- leadership and the development of the roles of nurses and midwives,
- maternal and child health,
- reducing the incidence of infectious diseases including HIV/AIDS,
- reducing the incidence of non-communicable diseases,
- health promotion,
- the work of the Commonwealth Steering Committee for Nursing and Midwifery, and
- the work of the CNF.

What specific activities can be undertaken?

Some suggestions for types of Commonwealth activities are:

- a local observance service (multi-faith, where appropriate).
- a workshop with a session drawing attention to the Commonwealth ideals and promoting the Commonwealth Day theme.
- a talk by someone from another Commonwealth country on his/her country and its relationship with the Commonwealth. This could be in conjunction with a celebratory lunch or workshop. It is suggested that contact could be made in your country with the High Commission of the country concerned to arrange a speaker.
- a meal (possibly with a function) consisting of dishes from other Commonwealth countries.
- a sporting event.
- a tree planting ceremony.