

EXECUTIVE SECRETARY REPORT
25th CNMF BIENNIAL MEETING OF MEMBERS
24 September 2022

I did not expect to be addressing you at this 25th CNMF Biennial Meeting of Members. Those of you who were present at the 24th CNMF Biennial Meeting of Members in London on 5th March 2020 will recall I announced my retirement from the position of CNMF Executive Secretary and enjoyed a very pleasant and special farewell.

The CNMF was so lucky to have been able to hold the 24th Biennial Meeting and the 5th Commonwealth Nurses and Midwives Conference which followed. Even as the Conference closed, countries were starting to close their borders and impose mandatory quarantine for returning travelers. A two-week quarantine was announced by my own country when I was on the plane returning home. Fortunately, kind neighbours dropped off provisions to see me through the quarantine period. The much anticipated 'Year of the nurse and the midwife' was a year like no other with very little to celebrate.

The COVID-19 pandemic really caught the world unawares and unprepared. Looking back two years' later, I don't think there is one country which handled the pandemic well. Neglected health systems struggled to cope, and decades of poor investment in the health workforce left all countries with insufficient staff and relying on health workers to plug the gaps by working overtime, double time and forgoing leave entitlements, increasing their own risk of ill health.

I don't have to tell you what nurses, midwives, and other health workers went through the past two years. You know it only too well yourselves. But we can all be proud of the way in which nurses and midwives heroically responded and willingly shouldered additional burdens to care for their populations. Governments were quick with their praise of nurses and midwives, but now the urgency has gone out of the response to the pandemic, we are yet to see that gratefulness translate into tangible action to strengthen health systems and the health workforce.

The focus on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and universal health coverage; reducing the impact on health systems of communicable and non-communicable diseases; and mitigating the effects of climate change on health and wellbeing was put aside during the pandemic and as a consequence we now have less healthy populations, more inequity, and a more fragile planet. The need for nurses and midwives to lead the way to restore health systems and refocus health service delivery has never been greater.

Governance

Following the 24th Biennial Meeting in 2020 and in consultation with the President and Board, it was decided to postpone advertisement for a new Executive Secretary for a few months. That few months turned into a few years. It became very clear that in-country projects would not be possible, significantly affecting CNMF revenue. Again, in consultation with the President, I reduced my hours of work from 36 hours each week to 21 hours each week starting from April 2020. This continued until December 2021. In January 2022, my hours were increased to 26 hours each week in order to

start applying for project grants and preparing for the advertisement and handover to a new Executive Secretary. All essential governance processes were continued throughout the pandemic: accreditation to the Commonwealth; reporting responsibilities as a UK Private Limited Company; and submission of company taxation returns. Board meetings were held online which proved challenging because of the time differences across the Commonwealth. Elections for President were held this year and I am pleased to announce that Professor Kathleen McCourt was elected unopposed for a further four-year term. Elections are still underway for Board members for the Atlantic; Pacific; and East, Central and Southern Africa Regions. I would like to express my thanks to outgoing Board members: Annie Butler, Paul Magesa, and Bettyann Murray-John.

Administration

Administrative processes run smoothly as most are digitised. I want to thank the Royal College of Nursing UK for their continuing support for the CNMF. The CNMF registered office is care of the RCN and the RCN scans and forwards any post to the CNMF. This has been particularly valuable during COVID when visits to the UK have not been possible. The friendship and collegiality from the RCN International Team have continued however, with monthly online calls which have been a great support. In the past, the RCN has also hosted the CNMF Board Meeting and Biennial Meeting of Members, and provided the services of their Events Team to support the CNMF Conferences but, as you are of course aware, the Biennial Meeting is being held online this year and the 6th Commonwealth Nurses and Midwives Conference was postponed until 2024.

Membership

Membership of the CNMF is stable. The Board have not recommended any change to the CNMF membership fees however a comprehensive review of CNMF membership is planned for this financial year which may see an increase in membership fees in 2024. Membership fees are structured according to the number of 'fee paying' members of an organisation. Membership fees are quite low and I am quite confident member countries can afford the annual membership fee or are able to fund raise to cover it. It is very time consuming chasing up members who have not paid invoices. Some of the late payment reflects an administration system within the majority of Commonwealth national nursing and midwifery associations that relies on volunteers who are busy people. However, having an efficient administrative system which pays invoices promptly is a feature of good governance.

Two new countries were admitted to the Commonwealth at the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, Togo and Gabon: Togo is in West Africa and shares a border with Cameroon. Gabon is in East Africa and shares a border with Ghana. Both Togo and Gabon are French speaking countries and gained their independence from France in the 1960's. So far, we have not been able to identify either a nurses or a midwives association in either country.

Finances

Finances are a mix of membership fees, project grants, project management fees, and consultancies. It is always a struggle for a small organisation to be competitive for grant funding and the work that we are capable of doing is limited by a lack of funding. CNMF income has been significantly affected by being unable to attract project funding because of the pandemic. Members have also been very slow in paying membership fees. It is hoped this situation will improve this financial year. The CNMF finances are audited annually and the CNMF is registered for taxation purposes in the UK.

Communication

The CNMF has maintained communication with members throughout the pandemic through the monthly e-News. Board members were asked to organise a two-hour online conference within their region although so far only the Europe Region conference has been held. Conferences are in the planning stage for the Atlantic Region and the Asia Region and it is hoped that the other regions will be organised early next year. There has been periodic disruption to communication from time to time for a range of reasons however communication has been maintained to the extent it was possible. One of the difficulties with communication is when the executive officers of associations change and the CNMF is not advised of the new contact details. While a contact update form is sent to each member at the beginning of each year, very few are returned which affects communication.

Liaison

The CNMF has maintained liaison with the Commonwealth Secretariat, and the Commonwealth Foundation, and continues to act as Secretariat for the Commonwealth Health Professions and Partners Alliance (CHPA). The CHPA hosted Commonwealth Civil Society Policy Forum was held in April 2022 prior to the Commonwealth Health Ministers' meeting. The topic was 'Commercial Determinants of Health'. As a bloc, the Commonwealth has been, and is, quite influential and there are Commonwealth forums where the voices of nurses and midwives would be silent if not for the Commonwealth Nurses and Midwives Federation. The CNMF has also maintained a close relationship with the International Council of Nurses and at present is exploring a more formal relationship between the two organisations.

Programs

Two CNMF programs were able to be progressed during the pandemic. The writing of new mental health legislation for The Bahamas has progressed to the tabling of the new Bill in Parliament. Meetings with the Bahamas National Mental Health Advisory Committee were held online, usually for me at a very late hour at night because of the time difference between The Bahamas and Australia. The project was supported with funding from the Commonwealth Secretariat.

The other program was supporting the Cambodian Council of Nurses (CCN) to write a scope of practice and standards of practice for nurses in Cambodia. This was stage 2 of a previous project. Stage 1 was working with the Cambodian Midwives Council (CMC) to undertake the same work. While Cambodia is not a Commonwealth country, the CNMF had worked closely and successfully on several projects in Africa with the funder, who was keen for the CNMF to undertake the project. The Board approved the work in Cambodia. All the consultations with the CCN Technical Working Group were able to be accomplished online. The success of the work with the CMC and the CCN led to a stage 3, working with the Pharmacy Council of Cambodia (PCC) and the Dental Council of Cambodia (DCC). This work has now been successfully completed, all online, and the funder is pushing for stage 4, to work with the Medical Council of Cambodia. It has been a very enjoyable project and the online work with the PCC and DCC Technical Working Groups and the interpreter has gone very smoothly. One of the outcomes of this project has been greater communication, cooperation and harmony between all five regulatory bodies in Cambodia.

Next steps

Preparing the organisation to advertise for and hand over to a new Executive Secretary will be a priority. The Commonwealth Secretariat has indicated their interest in funding further work on mental health legislation. A two-year project on oral health has been negotiated with C3, Colgate

and the CNMF in Tanzania, Kenya and South Africa will commence later this year. And stage 4 of the Cambodia scope and standards of project will also commence later this year. Consultations with the ICN will also continue to explore a closer relationship between the two organisations. The pandemic has taught us the value of online communication but also the limitations. The CNMF Board will be working toward a face to face 26th Biennial Meeting of Members and 6th Commonwealth Nurses and Midwives Conference in 2024.

Jill ILIFFE

Executive Secretary

Commonwealth Nurses and Midwives Federation

20 September 2022