

No matter what.

I can think of no better way of describing your spirit, your courage, and your unyielding commitment to the patients and families of Saskatchewan.

When it came to choosing a theme for our 2022 Annual Meeting, this was the perfect fit.

The global pandemic has challenged us as health care professionals in ways that no one could have ever have imagined just two years ago.

But you have all risen to the challenge since day one. You have been there for your patients and their families **no matter what.**

“Global pandemic” – now those are two words we are all, no do doubt, tired of hearing.

We have been living with this virus for more than two years, and every time we learn of a new variant, or the start of the next wave, we are filled with dread and fear about what comes next, and we are overcome by a sense of exhaustion.

When will this all end? When do we get to go back to the life we all knew?

These are the burning questions we all ask ourselves. The questions that dominate the media, our workplaces, our gatherings with friends and family, and even our own private thoughts when we are alone – I know this to be true for me. Some days it feels like we will never escape this pandemic.

It is hard to comprehend that “pandemic talk” has now become a part of everyday life.

This pandemic fatigue we are all experiencing is our reaction as individuals, and as a society, to the sustained stress we have all been living through. It is also this fatigue that is contributing to prolonging the pandemic – particularly in the public.

People have become numb to the data, to the death rates, and to rising hospitalizations. They are tired of masks and are once again crowding bars, restaurants, and sports facilities in a desperate cry for normalcy.

The difference for those working in healthcare, however, is that we do not get to step away from it all. We have to be there to pick up the pieces from the fallout.

We do not get to say: “I’m done with this” – “I’m ready to move on.” – “I think I’ll just start living my life as if it was February 2020 again.”

These are not options for us.

Personally, I have noticed my own motivation being challenged with each new wave. I fluctuate between hope, and on my darkest days, even hopelessness.

I have learned to acknowledge these feelings, to confront them, and to own them. They are valid, and they are human. But I have also learned to overcome them so that I can keep fighting for all of you, Saskatchewan's 11,000 Registered Nurses, Registered Psychiatric Nurses, and Nurse Practitioners.

I have to tell you all – this was a difficult address to write – I got quite choked up preparing to speak to you all today. My heart breaks knowing what you have all been going through and continue to go through. When I speak with all of you my instinct is to make it all better – that's what I am supposed to do.

This only strengthens my resolve to fight for you. But also to unite you – because we have to do this together.

My promise to be your voice, and to always be working to protect you, is my daily motivation – especially on those mornings when its hard to get up.

As registered nurses and leaders in healthcare, you have been challenged in so many ways these past two years, but you have shown up and you have delivered, in spades, for Saskatchewan.

Who else could have adapted so quickly to a crisis, as the registered nurses in our province have?

Since the beginning, you have learned to grapple with quick and often uncertain decision-making. You have found new ways to engage with your patients and families in the midst of a sometimes completely new care environment, often faced with new protocols, and operational policies.

But most importantly, you have delivered care reliably and safely in a world turned upon it's head.

And this unwavering commitment to be there – **no matter what** – needs to be celebrated.

No matter the hour – be it day or night – SUN members have provided the necessary care. No matter the patient – regardless of age, race, or religion, education, kindness, or cruelty, you have been there, without judgement.

You have guided Saskatchewan through some of our most difficult days – even when you have had to work short-staffed, and under huge pressure. At the end of the shift or at the beginning. For a patient's first breath or for their last – you have been there.

You have shown up when too much has already been demanded, and when not enough thanks have been offered – you have shown up, **no matter what.**

And I am so proud to stand with all of you today.

Unfortunately, however, the costs to this seemingly never-ending pandemic have been great for registered nurses.

You have shouldered the burden of COVID-19, and, as our most recent membership survey shows, you bear the scars for your efforts.

More than seven in ten of the sizeable 1,530 SUN members who chose to participate in our 2022 annual membership survey told us what we already suspected – and feared – to be true.

Registered nurses are suffering greatly with feelings of anxiety and helplessness, concern for patient safety, feelings of frustration or anger, and feelings of uncertainty and lack of confidence in leadership.

Think about that for a moment – more than seven in ten or 70% expressed these feelings. This is very troubling. And very sad.

SUN has been doing everything we can to hold decision-makers accountable, and to push them to do the right thing to protect the public, our health system, and all of you on the frontlines.

We have elevated your concerns, almost daily, to the SHA, ministry of health, and premier.

We have been vocal in the media to ensure the public understand the ongoing weight of this pandemic.

We have forged alliances with physicians at the Saskatchewan Medical Association, and with the province's pharmacists for the first time in decades, so that we may all speak with a single, unified professional voice.

We have stood in solidarity with the labour movement, and joined forces with Saskatchewan's teachers, to advocate for protections that would help bring an end to this pandemic.

And yet all of our pleas, and expert advice – whether offered united or alone – have been largely ignored by government – often until it was too late as we tragically bore witness to in the fourth and fifth waves, which saw so many preventable deaths and our health system brought to its knees.

It is thus of little surprise that registered nurses appear to have lost faith in all levels of governance, with the premier and minister of health notably receiving 68% negative performance ratings from registered nurses in this year's membership survey.

I know you are feeling unheard, unappreciated, and disrespected, but I want you to know that SUN will not give up advocating for you – and I will not give up on you. This is a promise.

In the year ahead, one of SUN's most pressing priorities is our growing registered nurse shortage.

We have reached crisis point, and it is not only impacting the wellbeing of Saskatchewan's nursing workforce, but the safety of patient care.

Nobody should be expected to carry such pressure when they show up to work each day. No wonder almost 60 per cent of SUN members have considered leaving our profession in the past twelve months.

This is a particularly concerning number, given how widespread, and deep current staffing shortages run.

As a registered nurse myself, and as the person elected to be your voice, it truly breaks my heart to know you are suffering so much at the moment. And it only strengthens my resolve to continue to demand action from our government.

We need more registered nurses. We need a concrete and sustainable health human resource strategy. You have told us this, and it's time government listens.

A staggering four in five SUN members report permanent or temporary vacancies in their workplaces — more than double when compared to last year's membership survey. And almost 90% say there just isn't the nursing staff to cover absences and new service demands.

This is why rural facilities are closing everywhere, reducing services, or going on bypass, and it is also why urban emergency rooms constantly report massive gaps in registered nurse staffing and feeling overwhelmed.

With the SHA reporting 647 registered nurse vacancies at the end of 2021, it is irrefutable we are in deep trouble. To put this in context, just prior to the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, statistics Canada reported just 95 vacancies in our province.

We are reaching a tipping point, where registered nurses are beginning to say: "enough is enough".

Without immediate relief, more registered nurses are going to leave the profession.

I know it feels like we're trying to dig ourselves out of a hole without a shovel, but there are real solutions, and bringing these registered nurse-made solutions forward, will be an ongoing priority in the months ahead.

We have the answers, we have the expertise, and we cannot be silent. Too much depends on our success.

SUN is committed to being the catalyst that will bring union, regulatory bodies, and education institutions to the table with government to solve this crisis.

We will not give up, because we know that safe staffing positively impacts your stress, workloads, and the overall strength of the health system. But most importantly, it's central to the safety of your patients.

These are all issues you have told us are your priorities.

Yes, things are broken right now in health care. But it does not have to stay this way.

The coming months and years will be tough, but registered nurses will be there to help pick up the pieces and rebuild, because **no matter what**, we always show up for our patients. And SUN will be there to support you every step of the way – listening to your needs and taking your lead.

I know that the content of my address has painted a dire picture for nursing and health care in our province, but I have never believed in sugarcoating a situation.

I think if we are to successfully solve a problem, we need to acknowledge the gravity of the issue honestly and openly as the first step. Then we can get to work.

Perhaps this practical, solutions-focused approach, is the registered nurse speaking from within me? But I do know you all speak this same language and appreciate my candor.

What I also believe in, is reminding you all of how amazing you are. How strong you are. And how Saskatchewan could not do it without you.

This meeting – these past two years – and even the year ahead – are all tributes to the dauntless spirit of registered nurses – they are a tribute to all of you.

I'll leave you with what I have previously written because I want you to hold it near to your hearts, especially during the difficult times.

No matter what, the call to care is within a registered nurse – it's a call to care for those in need, for the patients and clients who place their trust in our skills.

It cannot be turned on and off.

It is a part of who we are, and always will be, from the first shift to the last.

It cannot be learned, and it cannot be taught.

This call to care is in our DNA, and it is what sets registered nurses apart.

We answer the call – **no matter what.**

Thank you for everything.

And now, to lift your spirits, I'd like to show a short video of love and gratitude from the Saskatchewan public that we will be releasing for nurse's week as a thank you for all you do.

These heartfelt messages are a reminder that while we may not always hear it, we are appreciated. I hope you enjoy.