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It is spring in Ōtepoti Dunedin, and the daffodils are blooming. I find myself wondering what metaphor best fits Jean Ross's story. Perhaps the daffodil itself, bright and persistent, the national flower of Wales and a reminder of her beginnings. Or perhaps the red dragon, fierce and protective, flying across her homeland's flag. Or maybe the threads she so often speaks of, weaving people, places, and practices together.

Figure 1. The sight of spring. Photo credit: Jean Ross.

Whatever image I choose, the point is the same: Jean Ross's life and work are rooted in connection, resilience, and the determination to make rural nursing visible and valued. They stretch from Holyhead in North Wales, where she first saw the inequities faced by rural patients, to isolated communities in Aotearoa New Zealand, where she has supported nurses working at the time as the only health professionals on the ground. They extend into classrooms, research projects, and international collaborations, always interwoven with a commitment to making rural nursing visible, sustainable, and connected.

"Rural geographical locations, generally isolated, could be rural, remote or islands, and have a low-density population, generally high Indigenous, and are not well served for the provision of health care," she explains. "Those that do serve those communities have a collective vision to improve health disparity, improve access to health care, and work with local communities to identify their health needs and provide for them, being very adaptable to that."

The scope of rural nursing is staggering. "From birth to death, across the lifespan, acute emergencies, complex presentations, mental health and substance use, community education, [nurses are] now dealing with climate change, food insecurity, and economic disruption." In small places the nurse may be the only professional present, working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. "The most rural thing I've done, recently," Jean recalls, "is support those nurses, politically, educationally, and in policy development, because they were literally the only health practitioners available."

And yet, despite this breadth and complexity, rural nursing is not officially recognised in New Zealand. As Jean points out, "We are still registered nurses or nurse practitioners There is no recognised specialty of rural by the Nursing Council of New Zealand, despite years of lobbying. You can call yourself a rural nurse, but it is not formally recognised." She is quick to add that other countries do it differently: Scotland, Australia, Canada, and the United States all have formal rural health pathways, dedicated courses, and professional recognition. "Some countries do it better. I'm working with the University of the Highlands and Islands in Scotland, who provide a master's in rural health science specifically for rural nurses, which is what we pioneered nearly 30 years ago."

Jean's commitment to rural communities is rooted in her own childhood. She grew up in Holyhead, a port town on the island of Anglesey in North Wales. "We often travelled into England for health care," she recalls. "I saw Welsh-speaking patients needing treatment in England, completely outside their cultural and linguistic context." Later, as a charge nurse in Bangor, she became sharply aware of the barriers rural patients faced when accessing urban hospitals. "Patients had to go into England for health care, leaving their small rural areas, coming to what they called the big city, and then having to go further still. That experience of inequity has always stayed with me."

When she moved to New Zealand in 1991, settling in Oxford, North Canterbury, she found echoes of those Welsh experiences. The rural towns of Aotearoa had their own histories of inequity and resilience, and nurses were again the ones holding the line. Jean immersed herself in community health promotion and rural practice. In time, she co-directed the National Centre for Rural Health and began supporting nurses on Pitt Island, Stewart Island, and the West Coast, who were often the sole providers in those isolated communities. "To go rural is to understand rural," she declares, "and to practise rural means deeply understanding that community."

Her advocacy extends beyond practice into the classroom at Otago Polytechnic, where she constantly seeks ways to help students understand the realities of rural nursing. One of her most influential contributions emerged from recognising that students were struggling to find their way. "Community development became central to my work when I realised students were getting lost. We created the CHASE model, Community Health Assessment Sustainable Education, which has been adapted through COVID and is now published and used internationally."

The model was not born of theory but of a conversation in a classroom: "The CHASE model emerged from simply mapping where students were lost in learning. Out of that came a solution-focused framework, born from practice itself." What started as an ad-hoc sketch grew into a framework that has been cited internationally and adapted to different contexts. It remains rooted in her belief that practice itself is pedagogy.

She is critical of how traditional nursing education divides knowledge into silos. "We do ourselves a disservice when nursing education is siloed into papers like pharmacology or pathophysiology. Students need integration, not fragmentation." For Jean, reflection and application are non-negotiable: "Reflection is always part of my practice. To be the best practitioner is to be a reflective practitioner. Knowledge and skills only matter if they can be applied and applied critically."

Her students, she admits, are not always immediately enthusiastic. "Students often resist teamwork, but they learn to see its value: delegation, accountability, and collaboration. These projects are authentic, producing real resources for communities, and that experience never leaves them." She laughs about how many of them arrive "kicking and screaming" at the idea of community development projects, only to leave transformed. "Half the students resist at first, but by the end many are proud of making a real difference. Authentic feedback from communities motivates them deeply."

One project in Trearddur Bay, Wales, stands out. The town had the highest skin cancer rates in England and Wales. Jean's students researched, engaged the community, and, with the support of Melanoma UK and the local council, initiated free sunscreen stands at the beach. "By year three," she relates, "many nursing students can finally articulate their practice as reflective, connecting their knowledge with their application in real settings." The lesson, she says, is not only about public health but about the identity of the nurse as a contributor to community wellbeing. "I want them to leave understanding that nursing is as broad as you want it to be, and that they can make a difference everywhere, for everyone, and for the planet."

Research for Jean is not something separate, a task to be done on top of teaching. It is the same thing. "Research provides us the tools for evidence-based improvement. We can always do things slightly better. Research is not separate from education, it keeps us relevant, critical, and creative." She is vocal in rejecting the suggestion, sometimes voiced in government circles, that polytechnics should not do research:

> If we are providing an education, it needs to be the best it can be, it needs to be relevant, and to do that, we need to have people that are committed to the movement, to having the best. Research is what underpins that evidence, what keeps us in dialogue, what keeps us critical.

For her, research is not about outputs or publications, though she has edited five books, including one with more than 60 contributors. It is a way of thinking. "My nursing, education, and research practice are a continuum. One does not start or finish, they are embedded together. Practice itself becomes the pedagogy." The CHASE model is proof of that. It was research generated from practice, turned into pedagogy, and then returned to practice. "Where does one start and one finish? For me, it doesn't. It is a continuum. That becomes the pedagogy, the underpinning of how you go about teaching and learning."

She sees research as activism as well. "Supporting rural nurses means not only teaching, but also advocating politically, engaging in activism, and influencing policy development." Whether lobbying the Nursing Council for recognition of rural practice or embedding sustainability in curriculum, her research always connects back to making change.

Sustainability is one of those long battles. "It's taken 15 years to embed sustainability in nursing education," Jean says. "Lone voices don't work, you need the right people at the right time, embedded into curriculum and national policy." When she first began, climate change felt distant; now the evidence is undeniable. "Thirteen years ago we lacked strong evidence for climate change impacts. Now we have it, floods, fires, food insecurity, and we must use that evidence in teaching."

She draws inspiration from international colleagues writing on planetary health and One Health. "In our revised curriculum, we now focus on planetary health, and I'm pushing towards One Health, aligning nursing with global frameworks for health and sustainability." Students begin with photographs representing sustainability, then move into practice analysis, and finish with critical reflection through community development projects. The approach situates local practice in a global framework of planetary health: "International colleagues are writing on sustainability, planetary health, and One Health. By situating our work in that global body of knowledge, we strengthen nursing's contribution."

This ethos of connection extends into Jean's writing. "I haven't written a whole book myself, but I've edited five on rural health. No one else in New Zealand nursing has produced that body of work on rural health, and I think that leaves a mark." Editing those volumes required extraordinary coordination. "At one point I worked with over 60 contributors, across time zones, aligning voices into a single volume. It was exhausting but also affirming, a collective story of rural practice."

Her superpower, she says, is simple but transformative: "My superpower is being a connector, bringing people together. You don't always know you're a connector until you reflect and see the difference it makes." Whether coordinating authors, building research networks, or mentoring students, connection is the through-line.

As our conversation ends, I return to the daffodils outside, their yellow heads nodding in the spring breeze. I think about how Jean described her superpower. I think too of her advice for readers: "Believe in yourself. Believe in your ideas. Go for it. And if it fails, great, because you've learned from it. Be as creative as you can."

Daffodils, dragons, or threads: all could serve as metaphors. But it is the daffodils that stay with me: symbols of renewal, of resilience, of Wales in springtime, and of the flourishing that comes when we nurture connection. Jean Ross shows us that rural nursing is not marginal but central, connecting people, communities, and the planet. Her leadership is ongoing, collective, and deeply relational. It challenges nurses, educators, and readers alike to stay connected, stay reflective, and stay committed to making a difference.

Samuel Mann (Professor, CapableNZ, Otago Polytechnic) is a geographer and computer scientist whose focus is making a positive difference through professional practice. He developed the role of the sustainable practitioner, the Sustainable Lens, and the Transformation Mindset. He led the development of the Doctor of Professional Practice. When not working, he is probably swimming in open water.

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Jean Ross is a Professor of Nursing at the School of Nursing, Otago Polytechnic. Jean is also an advocate for sustainable rural community development and nurse education. Jean has been the editor in chief of Scope (Health & Wellbeing) since its inception. Jean's practice is research orientated which both informs and directs her scholarly work.

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