

Misunderstanding or misrepresentation? The use and misuse of the professorial title in nursing

Whether you are a professor or not should be a very simple matter; you hold a formal and substantial professorial appointment at a university. What could be easier than that? Except, it is not that simple. Many universities now award “honorary” or “visiting” professorships to people external to the organisation. Some of these individuals hold professorial posts at other universities and the honorary or visiting award is an important part of driving collaborative research and/or teaching activity. However, some of these honorary awards are not to people already holding earned professorial positions, but bestowed on people working in nonacademic posts—in industry or health care for example—people without substantive professorial or any other kind of academic position elsewhere. One area where there has been a rise in these kinds of appointments—particularly in the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia—is among senior nurses working in health care organisations that have local or national remits for nursing management or policy.

Concerns about this issue have been raised before over several years (Thompson, McCormack, & Watson, 2019; Thompson & Watson, 2008). We would like to add our voices to these concerns, contribute to that debate from some other angles, and also be a little less conciliatory towards those who (mis)use the professorial title and those who award them. This editorial is not about the fact that such honorary positions exist within universities, nor is it about where these titles are used correctly; it is about the misuse of the professorial title by nurses when their only claim to that rank is an honorary or visiting appointment. Is this really an issue worthy of an editorial one might say—is there any potential harm in this practice? We argue there is—for three reasons.

One—the unjustified use of the professorial title risks artificially inflating the nursing academy and de-valuing it at the same time. A professorial appointment is the pinnacle of academe—bestowed on someone with a long and illustrious track record in research or scholarship, PhD supervision success, someone with international impact, and someone—we can't quite believe we have to say this—who holds a PhD or other doctoral level qualification. Using the professorial title simply if it is an honorary appointment besmirches the professoriate in nursing—it dilutes what the profession and those looking from outside perceive what achievements and abilities underpin the title. This is particularly so when many people may not be able to tell the difference between a person holding an appointed substantive professorial role, and a person who is representing themselves as a professor through misuse of an honorary title. The overuse and the misuse of honorary and visiting professorial titles in nursing

therefore artificially inflates the number of professorial level nurses in the professions, our allied health colleagues and the public's mind. At the same time, it dilutes the title when it is awarded and used by those whose achievements do not meet the necessarily stringent academic tests set by universities for the award of a chair. What must someone who has worked for years to develop a strong academic career, failed at numerous promotion attempts, developed their CV to eventually achieve professorial appointment only to see their own university “award” the title to someone—or worse, many people—who have not trodden that hard road—yet heralds themselves as a “professor.”

This takes us to our second issue with the use of honorary titles—why are they awarded and could they be seen as a conflict of interest? We admit we have no data to support this and are happy to be corrected—but this seems to be a particularly prominent issue in nursing in the UK and Australia. Honorary professorial appointments are often made to very senior nurses and midwives who occupy key positions in local or national organisations often with connections to the awarding university. This may be done to facilitate collaboration—in fact, we are sure that is the reason many would claim for making these appointments.

Often some sort of honorary appointment is required to participate in projects, grants or indeed teach students. However, there are such things as honorary fellows, lecturers and senior lecturers that negate the argument that an honorary or a visiting *professorial* appointment be made—although they clearly don't have the same ring to them. There is a real danger this could be seen as “grace and favor” or “quid pro quo” when an honorary award is made to someone in a senior position in an organisation that provides a service to, or is a “customer” of, the awarding university. In the UK for example, the relationships between the National Health Service (NHS) and nursing and health faculties is symbiotic—the NHS needs trained nurses and the universities need students and, crucially, placements for those students. This relationship can become strained, involves funding decisions that are substantial and rely on delicate negotiation and agreements. Are these matters that could be aided by the awarding of honorary titles for example? We must stress that we have no evidence for that claim—however, the test of a conflict of interest is not that a conflict necessarily actually exists—but that a conflict may *appear* to exist.

Furthermore, if that is the case, the bestowing of the title could be regarded by some as a “back hander” to try to lock an organisation in a relationship through the awarding of a prestigious title to

a person influential in that organisation. In addition to this being a morally questionable practice, another issue is raised when the person continues to use the title even when they move jobs and no longer have an association with the awarding institution. Furthermore, what can happen is a person continues to use the title when no one knows who has awarded the title or for how long. This is unlike an appointed professor in a substantive position—the title is awarded by the employing university for the duration of employment to the professorial post. Sometimes in retirement continued use of the title is officially awarded by a university through the title of professor emerita.

Our third issue is related to what it may say about those who use an honorary or visiting professorship as a title in everyday use—on social media profiles, organisational web sites and conference proceedings. We think there are a few possibilities that underlie this. It could be down to simple naivety on behalf of the honorary, adjunct or visiting professor—they are unaware of the issues associated with misuse of the title and do not appreciate the points about distorting the academy or the potential conflicts of interest use of the title may portray. Another reason could be that universities are not clear enough about the use of honorary or visiting titles they award. Most universities do have guidance on this—which often state that holders of honorary titles may only use them in very certain circumstances—usually related to specific duties within the awarding institution. It may also be that these reasons overlap—and therefore could be remedied by universities being clearer about the limits associated with the honorary appointment. However, having said that universities are constantly awarding honorary doctorates to members of the entertainment industry—but we are not faced with a surfeit of comedians, actors and pop stars suddenly referring to themselves as Dr—they seem to understand the nature of the award.

In some cases therefore we could conclude that misuse of the professorial title is that the individuals are aware of the above issues—but still use the title to boost their own profile and standing within the profession. If this is the case, then this could be regarded as a form of professional misrepresentation and these individuals should be called out—people should not be billed as a “professor” on conference programs if their title is only honorary. Similarly, people selling consultancy and other services and (mis)using the professorial title for personal profit is very concerning, as people and organisations purchasing services from these people are likely doing so in the basis that they think they are dealing with actual legitimate professors. NHS and other health-related bodies should desist from allowing their staff (many very senior) from using the title on official web pages and documents. At very least the words honorary,

adjunct or visiting (depending on the actual award) should also be used—but they seldom are. In some cases it is likely people (mis)using the title professor know they shouldn't really use it as they are—but the lure of academic credibility is very strong—the title professor probably carries more weight in civilian life than any suffix. Paradoxically, even while using the title to convey that they have academic credibility, these people are diminishing the credibility of the title, and diluting the status of nurses who have worked to achieve this highest pinnacle of academic achievement.

This situation as we argue above is a lot more that “protectionism” and “elitism” by established professors. It has a negative impact on how academic nursing is seen and devalues the effort required to achieve the highest of academic positions. We add our voices to others who have called on universities—especially health faculties and schools—to consider their motives for making these awards (Thompson et al., 2019). Questions need to be asked about the benefits of bestowing these titles, both to the bestowing university and to the discipline of nursing. Furthermore, any bestowing of the title professor, should only be to people who have achieved the same track record and standing as any appointed substantive professor. That is, they should hold a doctoral qualification (or equivalent) and have achieved appropriate performance in other areas such as peer-reviewed publications and research or educational experience.

In addition, bestowing organisations should, at the very least, ensure that honorary, visiting or adjunct professors are aware of the regulations and guidance on how the title can and cannot be used—and police this. For those who are aware of the differences between honorary, visiting, adjunct and a substantial professorial appointment—yet still continue to refer to themselves as “professor”—our advice is simple; do not do it. At best it denotes a lack of respect for the knowledge and performance of those who earn the title; at worst it suggests deliberate misrepresentation that may lend some form of temporary academic credibility to the individual, but ultimately derides and devalues the scholarship and science of nursing.

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