In June 2002, representatives of the Council on Accreditation of Nurse Anesthesia Educational Programs (COA) and the International Federation of Nurse Anesthetists (IFNA) discussed the feasibility of establishing an international accreditation or approval process for nurse anesthesia programs throughout the world. The discussion took place during the 7th World Congress for Nurse Anesthetists in Helsinki, Finland, June 8-12, 2002. Kathleen Kinslow, CRNA, EdD, COA chair, presented a proposal to IFNA's Council of National Representatives and Betty Horton, CRNA, DNSc, former AANA director of Accreditation and Education, presented “A proposal for an international accreditation process” to meeting attendees during a plenary session on June 11. This article is based on Dr Horton’s speech. A conclusion by Dr Kinslow summarizes the response to various conferences from the international nurse anesthesia community.

Key words: International accreditation, nurse anesthesia, World Congress.

Accreditation in the United States
Nurse anesthetists have been approving or accrediting their own nurse anesthesia programs and schools for more than 50 years. The American Association of Nurse Anesthetists (AANA) initially approved schools prior to a change in AANA bylaws that created the Council on Accreditation of Nurse Anesthesia Educational Programs (COA) in 1975.

Both the federal and state governments in the United States officially recognize accreditation awarded by COA. There are currently 85 accredited schools that are associated with universities to offer master’s degrees. These schools use almost 800 hospitals where nurse anesthesia students obtain their clinical experiences. I have had the pleasure of serving as the director of the COA since 1990.

Accreditation by private accrediting agencies has long been accepted in the United States while most other countries rely on governmental supervision and control of educational institutions. Accreditation is a peer process whereby a private, nongovernmental agency grants public recognition to a school that meets or exceeds nationally established standards of acceptable educational quality. It includes extensive self-study by the school, an onsite visit to a school by trained educators, a decision by a panel of experts, and ongoing monitoring by an accrediting agency.

It is widely accepted that there are 2 fundamental reasons for accreditation: (1) to evaluate educational quality, and (2) to improve educational quality. Accreditation provides value to the public, students, school, profession, and government.

International process desirable
The purpose of this article is to present some ideas that could result in an opportunity for nurse anesthetists of the world to approve or accredit their own schools. These ideas are the result of hearing discussions among interested parties, including COA and the International Federation of Nurse Anesthetists (IFNA), for a number of years. An international accreditation process would be a new and expanded means to communicate and affirm the quality of nurse anesthesia schools offered throughout the world. It could be conducted by a private organization, such as IFNA or the COA. The process could be operated independently by a private organization or in partnership with a government.

The premise on which this proposal is based is a firm belief that nurse anesthetists throughout the world want to give the best possible care to their patients. If this is true, then it is essential that every anesthesia school provide students with a quality education so they will have the basic skills and knowledge to provide excellent care.

As educators we need to answer these questions:
1. How do members of IFNA...
know that our nurse anesthesia schools are truly “world class” and can stand up to international standards?

2. How do we simultaneously protect patients and maintain quality in education and practice?

Oscar Arias Sanchez, PhD, a 1987 Nobel laureate, said that education is a basic need second only to those vital for existence, food, clothing, and shelter. He also assigned the responsibility for providing such a fundamental right to governments worldwide. But it is not government that knows what student nurse anesthetists need to be taught. It is the nurse anesthetists in our profession. Isn’t it time to develop an international process where nurse anesthetists can evaluate their own schools to ensure high quality education and patient care?

Examination of proposal
When I was the feature editor of a junior high school newspaper, my teacher told me that reporters needed to answer 5 questions for their readers about any issue. The questions were who, what, why, when, and where? All of those questions applied to this article, with the exception of “where?” The questions to be considered concerning an international accreditation process are:

1. Who might be interested in conducting international accreditation or approval of nurse anesthesia schools?

2. What type of process would be used to start an international accreditation or approval process for nurse anesthesia schools? How would it work?

3. Why should an international process be developed? What is its value?

4. When could a plan be developed for an international process?

Who would conduct the process?
An international accreditation or approval process should be based on peer review. Peer review means that nurse anesthetists would judge the quality of nurse anesthesia schools based on written standards. A panel of nurse anesthetists identified by IFNA is one possibility. The panel members could represent both certificate and degree-granting schools that would be eligible for accreditation or approval. A positive outcome of a school’s review would result in accreditation or approval of the school.

Another possibility is to have an experienced agency, such as the COA, offer accreditation of anesthesia schools based on its own standards or on a set of international standards. If this model were adopted for use, it might be possible for:

1. Foreign degree-granting schools to be accredited using COA’s current standards.

2. Foreign certificate and degree-granting schools to be accredited or approved using international standards.

3. COA to assist countries or geographic regions in the development of their own accreditation or approval systems through an agreement that would be mutually acceptable.

What would the process look like?
Principles behind accreditation in the United States are connected to such issues as institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Peer review, self-analysis, and standards act as the framework. Due process, autonomy, expert judgment, trust, and focus on student learning are essential.

Every country in the world does not hold all of these values, however. Allowances will need to be made for each country’s values. But although we may have different values, I think we can all agree on a worldwide commitment to advancing academic quality for nurse anesthetists.

In developing an international process it must be recognized that treaties may have a bearing on the effort. Laws and regulations may complicate the issues. Questions of jurisdiction may need to be resolved when mobility of the profession is discussed. Communication, cultural differences, and politics will all have an impact on the process. These factors will need to be considered.

It also is important to recognize the differences between accreditation and approval:

• Accreditation includes extensive self-study by the school, an onsite visit to a school by trained educators, written reports, a decision by a panel of experts on accreditation, and ongoing monitoring by an accrediting agency.

• Approval does not include all components of accreditation. Approval could be as simple as a paper review of a curriculum to compare it against established standards.

An accreditation or approval process must meet the following basic minimum requirements:

1. A panel of experts would oversee the process.

2. Written accreditation standards must be used as the basis for evaluation.

3. It must be a peer review and voluntary process.

4. Cultural diversity among different countries and education systems need to be respected.

5. A panel of experts needs to review a school to decide whether or not:

   a. It has appropriate systems
in place to enable it to adhere to the standards. 
b. Its actions show that it is, in fact, adhering to the standards. For example, a school would have to align course content to meet the curriculum requirements in the standards. 
c. It has procedures to remedy the situation should problems arise that prevent it from adhering to the standards.

6. The panel of experts would make the decision to award approval or accreditation following a thorough review of applications and relevant documents.

Options for a school
A school could possibly apply for several types of approval or for accreditation. The following is a list of options:

1. Approval based on a system of periodic audits or checklists. For example, a curriculum might be reviewed by the accrediting agency to see if it contained topics that were required in standards. There would be no judgment on the quality of the curriculum. The school would receive a written report with recommendations. This is an approval process that would not result in accreditation.

2. Approval of the quality of the curriculum, or perhaps curriculum and faculty, applying the appropriate standards. The school would be expected to respond to specific questions about its curriculum and faculty. The school would receive a written evaluation and consultation appropriate for the areas being reviewed. This activity is an approval process but would not result in accreditation.

3. An opportunity to achieve accreditation status. The school would need to prepare a written self-study. Accreditation would be awarded or not after the accrediting agency reviewed the self-study, the report of an onsite visit team, and a response from the school after receiving a team's report. After a school achieved accreditation, it would receive a certificate and its name would appear on all official lists. This is an accreditation process that might be operated by a new international accrediting agency or an established accrediting agency such as the COA.

4. An opportunity to ask the COA or another country's accrediting agency to determine if a school is substantially equivalent to accredited programs in the agency's country. If a school were seeking to establish equivalency in the United States, COA's Standards for Accreditation of Nurse Anesthesia Educational Programs could be used for the evaluation. A written evaluation including a decision as to the equivalency of a school's curriculum with those in the United States would be sent to the school. This activity would not result in accreditation.

5. An opportunity to ask the COA or another country's accrediting agency to consider accrediting a nurse anesthesia school outside of the agency's country. In the United States, this might possibly result in accreditation by the COA.

Options for a country
A country could possibly apply for several types of service, which are listed below:

1. Assistance and consultation to develop its own approval or accreditation process appropriate for its country.

2. An affiliation with an established accrediting agency, such as the COA, to acquire various services if the country has adopted its own evaluation or accreditation process.

3. Recognition of substantial equivalency with other accreditation systems in various countries to assess that the graduates of accredited programs are prepared to practice at the entry level to the profession.

Why develop an international process?
I asked a group of new nurse anesthesia educators in the United States this question, "What is the value of accreditation?" They said that accreditation:

• Demonstrates a commitment to quality education.
• Makes it easier for graduates to get jobs.
• Makes schools comparable so academic credits transfer between schools.
• Validates the need for adequate resources to operate a school.
• Brings a school to the attention of administrators.
• Serves as an internal and external audit process.
• Gives a school status, prestige, and a good reputation.
• Helps in recruitment by attracting good students.
• Encourages standardization of schools by setting minimum standards.
• Ensures that nurse anesthesia graduates are competent.
• Encourages geographic mobility of nurse anesthetists by standardizing their education.
• Promotes a good image for nurse anesthetists.
• Increases expectations for professionalism.

When could a process be developed?
When could a plan be developed for an international process? Many
questions need to be answered in order to determine the future of an international accreditation or approval process for nurse anesthesia schools. Is there a market for an international approval process? Can we afford it? As educators, are you interested? Should a business plan be developed? I think we can see the need to find answers to these questions by looking at what is happening in some parts of our world. Teaching or learning activities are taking place in which the students are in a different country than that of the institution that is providing the education or training. Universities have branch campuses, education programs are linking together, distance learning technology is growing, and students are studying abroad.

The development of an international accreditation and/or approval process for nurse anesthesia schools would encourage continual improvement in nurse anesthesia schools worldwide. Communication would be expanded with greater access to information resources to all schools. Is it time to produce globally prepared nurse anesthesia graduates? Perhaps it is. However, it is definitely time for nurse anesthetists to think seriously about globalizing our profession through education.

**Conclusion by Kathleen Kinslow, CRNA, EdD**

During the 7th World Congress for Nurse Anesthetists in Helsinki, Finland, participants in various conferences expressed a great deal of interest in the concept of international accreditation. The approach is one of quality assurance with a desire by member countries to enhance the didactic and clinical offerings within nurse anesthesia educational schools and to develop a more standardized framework in which nurse anesthetists would be educated.

Overwhelmingly, nurse anesthesia educators from the international community had the same goals and outcomes in mind: to continually improve and advance education for nurse anesthetists by raising standards and monitoring outcomes throughout the world. Although there are many differences and barriers that would need to be overcome in order to execute international accreditation, the desire and intent is present and with that implementation is possible.

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