

Remedies to Help the Nursing Shortage

What are the latest predictions for the nursing shortage in the not too distant future? According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN): "... the impending decline in the supply of RNs will come at a time when the first of 78 million baby boomers begin to retire and enroll in the Medicare program in 2010." Geraldine Bednash, PhD, FAAN, Executive Director of the Vanderbilt University School of Nursing, and colleagues predict that although the number of full-time RNs will reach a peak around the year 2007, thereafter these numbers will steadily decline. According to Bednash, the continued aging of RNs (the average age of RNs in this country will be 45.5 years in the next 10 years), and expanding career options for women (women account for 90 percent of RNs) are two major factors contributing to this anticipated decline.

Dr. Bednash reports that "... enrollments in entry-level baccalaureate nursing programs decreased by 4.6 percent in the fall of 1999 — the fifth consecutive decline in as many years." She states the decline in nursing school enrollments can be attributed to such factors as the image of nursing among young people and the perception of high school guidance counselors that nursing is not "... an intellectual endeavor," and that potential BSN students are "discouraged from pursuing a nursing career by the confusing array of entry-level options available in the profession."

This long-predicted nursing shortage is being faced head-on by nursing leaders, the federal government, hospitals and health care institutions and, especially, by nurses themselves. What are nursing leaders recommending as remedies for this impending crisis? Responding to the research on this issue, a commentary in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, by Bednash and colleagues, says that to reverse the expected shortage of nurses in this country, several initiatives, such as changes in education and credentialing, restructuring of work settings, and implementation of new systems of care that enable RNs to use their

professional skills, must take place. Two of the recommendations are:

- Credentialing of RNs should be based on the different educational preparation and competencies of baccalaureate and associate-degree programs. Different licensure examinations should be established for the various levels of education.
- Practice settings should be restructured to employ nurses based on their differing education and patient care capabilities. For example, hospitals that are successful in recruitment and retention have a history of allowing RNs more predictable, or more flexible, work schedules, as well as encouraging nurses' active involvement in decision making.

For school nurses who are managing growing numbers of students with increasing healthcare needs, and have minimal staffing assistance, the crisis will be felt close to home — in school health offices everywhere. School nurses nationwide are in contact with young people each day. Who better than the school nurse to applaud the nursing profession as a viable career? Now is the time to get involved, and school nurses, as role models for young people, can spread the word that the nursing profession has been and will be a career worth pursuing.

One of the most effective means of nursing recruitment is a personal, one-to-one approach. At the North Carolina Center for Nursing, nurses are being encouraged to use this technique in talking to youngsters about our profession. Replicating a study in the United Kingdom, the Center holds focus groups of students in sixth, tenth, and twelfth grades to ascertain their view of nursing as a career. It was learned that for young people who select nursing as a career, the determining factors involve having a family member who is a nurse or having a relationship with someone in nursing. Suggestions have been formulated to assist nurses in talking to young people about nursing:

- Point to the intellectual challenges and high level of knowledge in the nursing profession.

- Speak about the critical thinking and continuing education required.
- Refer to nurses as "autonomous practitioners." To dispel the limited perception that nurses take physicians' orders, emphasize that nurses today are collaborative professionals who are contributing members of health delivery teams.
- Discuss the plethora of options available in the nursing professions and the age groups and specialty areas that can offer future nurses a variety of career choices within one profession.
- Talk about the potential for career advancement and educational opportunity.
- Stress the importance of "helping people" and "making a difference" — the most frequently cited reasons why students choose nursing as a career.
- Minimize students' fears about the "Squeamish Factor" that focuses on blood, death, giving injections and the like, the most frequently reported reasons for rejecting nursing as a career.

The Center recommends presentations on nursing to students as an effective recruitment strategy, as well as a "Shadow-a-Nurse" session to create a personal experience for young people and expose them to the range of what nurses do in their practices. Whatever technique is employed, the Center reminds us that long-term strategies are more effective than short-term "quick fixes." What do you envision as a strategy to use in your school? Give it some thought ... if just one endeavor touches one student, you will have made a valuable contribution to your profession. Can we afford to do less? 🐦

RESOURCES

American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN). Dramatic reforms required to head off cycles of nursing shortages. *JAMA* editorial recommends. [press release] July 14, 2000.

Dr. Bednash's commentary is available at AACN's Web site at www.aacn.nche.edu or from the AACN Office of Public Affairs at (202) 463-6930, ext. 231.

Sherrod, D.R. Let's talk with kids about nursing. *ADVANCE for Nurses*, DC/Baltimore, 2(18), 25-26, September 11, 2000.