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The Nursing Crisis: The Solution Lies Within

Abstract

The nursing crisis, in our country, has reached such epidemic proportions that congressional testimony indicates a need for immediate action. Exploring the causes, finding clues to the attrition, and understanding the implications of this worsening shortage can help us to search for solutions. This paper attempts to express how solutions may lie within the nursing profession itself to stop the outflow of nurses from the profession and to increase the inflow of new individuals to the profession.

Introduction

On September 25th 2001, a congressional hearing took place to address the problem of the current nursing shortage, which has reached critical proportions. Members of the House of Representatives met and heard nurses tell stories of poor working conditions that include inadequate staffing, heavy workloads, use of mandatory overtime, lack of sufficient support staff, and inadequate wages. One such nurse from a Washington area hospital said eliminating mandatory overtime, setting better nurse to patient ratios and giving staff nurses a voice in hospital policy were more important than higher pay. "Until you fix the working environment, the salary issue is kind of moot" (Romig, 2001, p. 733). The current nursing shortage, unlike those of the past, appears to be headed toward a path of rapid decline.

This unstable environment in the healthcare setting has been blamed on many issues that stem from changes in healthcare to societal attitudes about the nursing profession. Steps can be taken and words spoken that can lessen the declivity¹ of nursing professionals. This has become an issue that affects all Americans and immediate steps need to be taken to stop the worsening progression of this threat to healthcare as we know it.

PROPOSAL ESSAY

As a nursing student at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, Michelle Pollard wrote this paper for the *Journal of Undergraduate Nursing Scholarship*. In it, she vividly describes the nursing shortage in the United States, as well as some ways to solve the shortage. Pollard wrote this piece while she was a nursing student. What writing have you constructed that might be published one day?



¹ declining number

Exploring the Causes

An aging population of patients that are often in need of more intense and specialized care from qualified medical professionals, of which nurses comprise the largest percentage, is adding fuel to the fire of this worsening crisis (Heinrich, 2001). The increase in the number of higher acuity patients with the added burden of a shrinking nursing population results in a bleak picture for the future of the profession.

According to congressional testimony by the House Education and Workforce Committee, the nursing workforce is aging and there are not enough new nurses entering the profession to replace those retiring or leaving (Heinrich, 2001). According to Senator Jim Jeffords (2001), I-Vt, the average age of a nurse is presently between 42-45 and by 2010 nearly 40% of the nursing workforce will be over the age of 50 and nearing retirement. "Our nation has suffered from nursing shortages in the past. However, this shortage is particularly severe because we are losing nurses from both ends of the pipeline," Jeffords said.

Clues to Attrition

Not only are the majority of nursing professionals aging, but many young people are choosing other careers. A recent study reported that women graduating from high school in the 1990s are 35% less likely to become nurses than women who graduated in the 1970s (Heinrich, 2001). Women today have more job options, many of which offer better pay, more job satisfaction, and perceived better working conditions ("Nursing Shortage," 2001).

Experienced nurses are opting out of nursing after many years, as well, looking for less stressful and more lucrative careers. A survey done by the Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals found that half of the currently employed RNs had considered leaving the patient care field for reasons other than retirement over the past two years (Heinrich, 2001).

Understanding the Implications

The shortage of qualified nursing personnel is an issue that affects anyone who is a provider or consumer of healthcare in this country. Consumers are affected directly by quality of care from nurses who feel they are overworked and overstressed due to the increasing demands on their time. Physicians are affected, as well, in their everyday practice and dealings with nurses and patients. According to one physician, "we are increasingly feeling the strain of a hospital nursing staff who are stretched too thin" (Stapleton, 2001, p. 30). The situation inevitably leads to a question of quality of care in settings such as hospitals.

As employers of the largest segment of healthcare professionals, administrators of hospitals and other facilities are also directly affected by

the nursing shortage. A poll by the American Hospital Association (AHA) reports from a survey of 700 hospitals that there are approximately 126,000 nationwide RN positions currently vacant ("Publication," 2001). Maryland, for example, reported a statewide vacancy rate for hospitals of 14.7%, up from 3.3% in 1997. California reported a vacancy rate of 20% among its hospitals (Heinrich, 2001).

Proposing Solutions

There is no tried and true solution to a problem that has been seen before by this profession, but how do we stop the downward spiral as we lose current and future nurses to other, more attractive career choices? Efforts made to improve the workplace environment may both reduce the likelihood of nurses leaving the field and encourage more young people to enter the nursing profession. Governmental agencies can help bring new nurses into the profession by offering money for tuition assistance as well as all related expenses. Hospitals and other healthcare agencies can offer more attractive employment packages and listen firsthand to the issues surrounding the dissatisfaction of their nursing staff. Nurse managers that work closely with top administrators and have voices that leaders listen to can take a stand for nursing as a whole. The reports show that nurses would have increased job satisfaction if they had better working relationships with supervisors who have real power and autonomy (Welch, 2001, p. 24). But the majority of the burden for improving the job satisfaction lies within each of us as nurses.

Improving the workplace environment has to start from within the profession itself. As Mueller (2001) notes in an article in *Creative Nursing*, "we know we are proceeding into a serious global nursing shortage. . . . And we are discovering that some of the solutions lie within each one of us" (p. 3). As nurses we have voices that can be heard through all the administrative and governmental offices, but we must find ways to speak collectively and constructively. Oftentimes nurses are not assertive in telling the story of what it is that causes them to be dissatisfied, and many degrade the profession by complaining and not acting to improve it. Do we not hurt ourselves as well as the profession by discouraging qualified individuals from choosing nursing as a career? To express ourselves completely and honestly, we must first look to develop personally and professionally. We, as nurses, need to implement a plan of action to further enhance our professionalism and solicit new members. My suggestions for such a plan include:

- First, "Do no harm"; do not degrade the profession by words, actions, or deeds.
- Become a teacher, mentor, role model to young professionals.
- Develop a strategy for community awareness and respect for the profession.

- Strive to continue to elevate our own personal standards and the standards of our profession (i.e., educational requirements should be MSN[®] for managers and teachers).
- Find ways to enhance the collective voice of nursing in your workplace, state, country.
- Finally, have pride and enjoy the wonderful and rewarding career that you have chosen.

These ideas can help our profession gain a sense of why it is we are important to society and why we are irreplaceable to the healthcare system. By continuing to discuss only the negative nursing experiences, we discourage many prospective nurses from entering the profession altogether. Nurses need to share stories of how wonderful and rewarding a career in nursing can be. "I have never been bored or disinterested in nursing because I've been able to have so many roles in many settings . . . nursing is intellectually stimulating as I read articles in nursing, attend conferences and meetings and use that knowledge in my practice . . . I could share that I have had the pleasure of participating in the professional growth and development and that almost everyday new opportunities present themselves to me because I am a nurse . . . and that I haven't regretted a day or a moment for having chosen nursing as a career" states Christine Mueller, RN, PhD (2001, p. 5).

It is stories like these that will bring those future nurses into a career that can be more rewarding than most. How many other careers allow you to be a part of the milestones of life like birth and death, recovery from illness and trauma, and make a difference in the lives of those who cross our path? Nurses are the backbone of the patient care setting, offering holistic care unlike any offered by other members of the healthcare team. And as nurses we have an obligation to save our profession from further deterioration and overall worsening of the nursing shortage.

Whether you are a bedside nurse or a top nursing executive, it is the responsibility of us all to make our voices heard throughout the halls of our hospitals, state legislatures, and this country. We must show why it is important to improve conditions and what a wonderful and rewarding career nursing is and can be to many individuals who have much to offer as an outstanding and admirable profession. If we, ourselves, have immense pride and respect for what it is we do, we have to influence others to share this frame of mind in order to make a difference in the careers we have chosen. Be proud and speak loudly, letting everyone know what a noble and caring profession it is that we share.