No Nursing Shortage: Being in the Know

The phrase nursing shortage can evoke a visceral response based on each professional nurse’s frame of reference. The hospital-based bedside registered nurse (RN) who worked a busy holiday weekend may quickly respond, “You bet there is.” The graduate RN who cannot find a position in the local area will most likely emphatically say, “No way.” A clinical nursing faculty member facing increasing numbers of students in clinical nursing groups and challenges in linking a student with a tenured RN for clinical experiences, and is aware of qualified nursing program applicants on waiting lists due to faculty constraints may emphasize, “The role of the RN includes translating data to information and making knowledge-based decisions now and for the future.”

Global economic trends have brought experienced RNs back into the workforce or led them to increase their hours from part-time to full-time as spouses have lost jobs. Conversations in the workplace contain statements of retirement being delayed. A recent article on the front page, above the fold, of USA TODAY, supports the new RN graduate’s perception as the metropolitan area of Cincinnati, OH, reported the tightest RN employment market in 20 years. Florida and Arizona echoed a narrowing employment market for new graduate RNs (Young, 2010).

A Closer Review

A blog posted on the Economic Modeling Specialists, Inc. (EMSI), web site listed Nevada and Alaska as the only states where the number of new graduate RNs was not greater than the number of RN openings. While EMSI acknowledges limitations in its data, the information posted indicates there will be an overabundance of 85,595 RNs over the next 5 years being introduced into the American work force (EMSI, 2010). These data reinforce the feeling there is no nursing shortage. Closer review of national trends and examination of sources representing and leading the professional nursing community validate the reality of a true nursing shortage and offer positive short-term and long-term options and opportunities for the RN.

The American Health Care Association reported a national vacancy rate of staff RNs at 16% (American Health Care Association [AHCA], 2008). According to a National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses, 73,000 RNs exit the nursing profession each year for reasons related to child-bearing, child-rearing, changing careers, or retiring (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration [HRSA], 2010). Recent health care reform will provide more than 45 million Americans with access to health care over the next few years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Before age 50, more than 90% of RNs practice nursing; by age 65, however, less than 50% of RNs continue in nursing positions (AHCA, 2008). An estimated 900,000 RNs are over age 50. The average age of RNs in 2008 was 47 (American Nurses Association [ANA], 2010; HRSA, 2010). As the current RN workforce and RN educators age to become the new elder consumers of health care, there will be increased demands for RNs.

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing, ANA, American Organization of Nurse Executives, and the National League for Nursing compose the Tri-Council for Nursing. These four independent nursing organizations are united by common purpose, values, and the stewardship of professional nursing. They collaborate on issues that affect nursing education, practice, policy, legislation, research, and leadership across the entire health care delivery system. A recent Joint Statement from the group identified multiple gaps, questioned the accuracy of sources, and disputed the completeness of data gathering and statistical reporting within the EMSI blog (ANA, 2010). The Tri-Council offered strong caution in acting on the EMSI data. A full text of the Tri-Council Statement is available online (http://www.nursingworld.org/FunctionalMenuCategories/MenuResources/MediaBackrounders/Registered-Nurse-Supply-and-Demand-Projections.aspx).

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A Promising Future

The employment future is very promising for RNs. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) placed registered nursing as the occupation with the most robust growth compared to other occupations for 2008-2018. Projected growth of 22%, or more than 580,000 employment opportunities, is expected for RNs. Parts of the health care industry will grow at a different pace and in different directions than in previous years. RN roles in physician offices anticipate growth at 48%; home care 33%; extended care facilities 25%; and hospital settings 17% (BLS, 2009).

As patients participate in preventive care and are discharged sooner, and as more procedures are performed outside the hospital setting, the number of hospitalized patients will not increase significantly. However, patients hospitalized for more than 24 hours of care will require frequent assessment due to complex illness states and advanced age. They also will need advanced skill sets to manage complex treatments, sophisticated technology, interventions reflective of research, evidence-based practices, and best practice outcomes. Hospitalized patients will require more RNs. Outpatient care requiring expert skill sets, such as chemotherapy, same-day surgery, long-term care for patients experiencing Alzheimer's disease, stroke rehabilitation, home care, independent emergency care, and ambulatory surgery centers, will present additional employment avenues for RNs (BLS, 2009).

The baccalaureate-prepared nurse, the four advanced practice specialties (clinical nurse specialist, nurse practitioner, nurse anesthetist, nurse midwives), and nursing educators will be in greatest demand. The underserved patient populations of the inner city and rural areas will demonstrate a high need for cost-effective primary care nurse providers (BLS, 2009).

Stay Informed

For graduate RNs, being flexible in accepting a position to build skills and gain experience will position them eventually to attain desired professional roles. Some geographic regions find the availability of RN positions shifting from the acute care hospital setting to the extended care or skilled nursing facilities.

For those making educational decisions, considering the entry-level baccalaureate nursing program will benefit them throughout their careers. Experienced RNs who currently practice nursing have the opportunity to role-model professional behaviors that nurture novice colleagues, view students as future colleagues, and advocate for safe, evidence-based practices for patients. Bedside RNs use facts, trends, and reliable sources of evidence to make care decisions. The same level of scrutiny is imperative in knowing facts from national professional sources when discussing professional nursing issues. A comprehensive nursing shortage fact sheet can be obtained online (http://www.aacn.nche.edu/Media/FactSheets/NursingShortage.htm).

As RNs, we all have a stake in knowing the facts that will help legislators, colleagues, and the public stay informed about the nursing shortage. In a very short time, novice RNs of today will become future RN caregivers for current RN experts.

References


