

National Nursing Shortage Overview

The United States is facing the most profound shortage of nursing professionals in its history. Health care professionals, education leaders and government officials have expressed deep concern that without intervention, this crisis will continue to escalate as the nation's population ages putting additional demands on the health care system.

How significant is the nursing shortage and what is expected for the future? The following statistics provide a look at this pervasive public health problem:

Prevalence of the Nursing Shortage

There is a growing demand for registered nurses (RNs) in hospitals and all other health care settings. According to a report released by the American Hospital Association in April 2006, U.S. hospitals need approximately 118,000 (RNs) to fill vacant positions nationwide, which translates into a national RN vacancy rate of 8.5 percent. By 2020, the RN shortage could approach 800,000 positions according to an analysis by Vanderbilt University's School of Nursing.

- **Hospitals and other health care settings are facing a shortage of nurses.** According to the 2005 survey by the American College of Health Executives on the Top Issues Confronting Hospitals, 85 percent of hospital CEOs reported having a shortage of registered nurses. In addition, the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) estimates that by 2020, 44 states plus the District of Columbia will be unable to meet the demand for nurses in hospitals and extended-care facilities.
- **The nursing shortage is especially acute in certain regions of the country.** The American Hospital Association reports that in some areas, hospitals have vacancy rates as high as 19 percent for full-time RN positions.

Why a Nursing Shortage?

The population is growing and aging. Projections show the nation's population will grow 18 percent between 2000 and 2020, resulting in an additional 50 million people who will require health care. However, seniors aged 65 and over are expected to grow 54 percent between 2000 and 2020, and this population will require significantly higher levels of medical attention than their younger counterparts, according to the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration.

- **Nurses are aging.** According to the results of the 2004 National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses by the Federal Division of Nursing, the average age of the RN population in March 2004 was 46.8 years of age, up from 45.2 in 2000. The RN population under the age of 30 dropped from 9.1 percent of the nursing population in 2000 to 8.1 percent in 2004. Forty percent of all RNs will be older than 50 by the year 2010, according to the Government Accounting Office.
- **The number of young RNs has decreased dramatically over the past two decades.** Enrollments of young people in nursing programs would have to increase at least 40 percent annually to replace those expected to leave the work force through retirement, according to Peter Buerhaus, Ph.D., Valere Potter professor of

nursing; senior associate dean for Research at the School of Nursing, Vanderbilt University (November/December 2003 issue of *Health Affairs*).

- **Nursing school enrollment and graduation rates have increased, but shortage still looms.** Enrollment in entry-level baccalaureate programs in nursing increased by 13 percent in 2005—up 3 percent from the previous year. Despite this increase, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) remains concerned that too few nurses are entering the work force given the growing demand for nursing care.
- **Nursing school faculty shortages are prohibiting the growth of nursing program enrollments.** According to AACN's report on *2005-2006 Enrollment and Graduations in Baccalaureate and Graduate Programs in Nursing*, U.S. nursing schools turned away 32,617 qualified applicants from baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs in 2005 due to insufficient number of faculty, clinical sites, classroom space, clinical preceptors, and budget constraints. Almost three quarters (73.5 percent) of the nursing schools responding to the 2005 survey pointed to faculty shortages as a reason for not accepting all qualified applicants into entry-level nursing programs. In addition, many faculty are aging toward retirement – associate professors and assistant professors have an average age of 52 and 49, respectively, according to the AACN.

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