

Nursing Shortage Driven by Nurses' Dissatisfaction with the Profession, Lack of Appeal Among Men and Minorities, Report Finds

More Professional Work Environments, Full Partnerships with Physicians Needed

PRINCETON, N.J. (May 8, 2002). The current shortage of nurses in the United States is fundamentally different from past shortages, reflecting dissatisfaction with the profession by nurses and competition from other career opportunities for women, according to a new report, *Health Care's Human Crisis: The American Nursing Shortage*, commissioned by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

“Previous nursing shortages were the result of mismatches between supply and demand,” says report co-author Edward O’Neil, Ph.D., M.P.A., of Health Workforce Solutions in Alameda, Calif., and director of the Center for the Health Professions at the University of California, San Francisco. “But this shortage takes place at a time when women, who have traditionally filled the nursing role, have many more educational and professional opportunities than they did in the past. Nursing has simply become less attractive to women. Until nurses gain a real place at the decision-making table, we’ll continue to have a shortage of nurses.”

Demographic factors such as an aging nursing workforce, the aging of the baby boom generation, a smaller pool of young people in the workforce and nursing’s failure to attract large percentages of men and minorities also contribute to the shortage.

Collective Efforts

The report finds that sustainable solutions to the nursing shortage will require collective efforts by groups concerned about the nursing shortage, including nurses and nursing

profession leaders, nurse educators, health care industry leaders, labor organizations, policy makers, philanthropies and consumer groups.

The current strategies taken by many health care organizations to address the nursing shortage, however, focus on narrower objectives, generally only involving members of the respective organizations. “In general, what we’re seeing at this stage is the silo effect,” says report co-author Bobbi Kimball, R.N., M.B.A., of Health Workforce Solutions. “There’s a wealth of very productive activity going on to address the nursing shortage, but key stakeholders aren’t necessarily working together. The national nursing organizations, for instance, are doing tremendous work to establish common goals, influence public policy and improve the professional image of nursing, but to be successful, their efforts must be advanced and sustained by health care providers, labor and other industry stakeholders.”

Recommendations

The nursing shortage will pose a major public health crisis if it continues unabated, according to the report.

“We had to ask the hard questions,” says Steven A. Schroeder, M.D., president and CEO of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “It would be easy and comfortable to look to the old answers and call for familiar responses such as monetary incentives, but they have not been working that well. We must re-examine some of our long-held assumptions about the nursing profession and its position within the health care system.”

With the goals of re-envisioning the nursing profession and helping it establish a full partnership with the profession of medicine, the report offers five recommendations:

- Develop new models of nursing and health care provision and advance the study of nursing's contributions to health care outcomes and consumer satisfaction;
- Reinvent work environments and nursing education to address the needs and values of those currently in the profession and appeal to a new generation of nurses;
- Establish a national nursing workforce measurement and data collection system;
- Create a clearinghouse of effective strategies to advance cultural change within the nursing profession;
- Form a National Forum to Advance Nursing, an independent body that would draw together a wide range of interested parties to work on the recommendations above.

A complete copy of *Health Care's Human Crisis: The American Nursing Shortage* can be found at www.rwjf.org/special/nursingshortage.

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Health Workforce Solutions, based in Alameda, Calif., is a management-consulting firm that brings evidence-based solutions to workforce issues in health care delivery and educational institutions.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, based in Princeton, N.J., is the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and health care. It concentrates its grant making in four goal areas: to assure that all Americans have access to basic health care at

reasonable cost; to improve care and support for people with chronic health conditions; to promote healthy communities and lifestyles; and to reduce the personal, social and economic harm caused by substance abuse -- tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs.

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