

Issue: Critical Shortage of Healthcare Professionals

Framing the Issue

The healthcare industry faces a growing and increasingly critical shortage of healthcare professionals in the United States and around the globe. In the U.S., the healthcare workforce shortage is particularly acute among qualified nurses, pharmacists, and a variety of therapists and medical specialty technicians.

The dwindling supply of qualified healthcare professionals comes at a time when the demand for healthcare is increasing the burden on our nation's healthcare delivery system. As a group, older people typically require more healthcare than the rest of the population. The number of Americans over age 65 is expected to balloon from 34.8 million in 2000 to 53.7 million in 2020. The Bureau of Health Professions estimates that the number of healthcare jobs will need to grow from nearly 11 million in 2000 to over 14 million in 2010 to meet the increased healthcare demand as the "baby boom" generation begins to reach age 65. ¹

Nowhere is this alarming workforce shortage more acute than among registered nurses (RNs), the professionals who have provided the bulk of direct patient care. Like our population in general, a large segment of working RNs is nearing retirement age, and an inadequate number of nurses are in the employment "pipeline" to replace them. Women, who have traditionally filled the large majority of nursing jobs, are being drawn today to a greater variety of careers in and out of healthcare that they find more appealing.

Today, roughly 13% of U.S. nursing positions goes unfilled, a vacancy rate expected to climb to 20% by 2015. ² By 2020, our nation will face a projected shortage of more than 400,000 RNs. Enrollment in our nation's nursing education programs, which has declined annually since 1995, would have to immediately increase an unlikely 40% to offset the projected RN shortfall. ³

¹ "In Our Hands: How Hospital Leaders Can Build a Thriving Workforce" (pg. 9), a report from the American Hospital Association's (AHA) *Commission on Workforce for Hospitals and Health Systems*, April 2002.

² AHA statistics cited in "Nursing Shortage Forces Hospitals to Cope Creatively," *New York Times*, 1-6-04.

³ "Strengthening Hospital Nursing," research sponsored by the Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality, September 2002.

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Unfortunately, the number of nursing educators beginning to retire is expected to outpace the supply of new instructors. As a result, nursing schools find themselves with more candidates than faculty and classroom space to accommodate them all.

While the nursing shortage has yet to hit Idaho as it has other regions of the country (and the world), the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services estimates that if current trends continue the shortage of nurses in Idaho will be almost twice the expected national average by 2020. ⁴

This worsening workforce supply-demand imbalance creates serious consequences for our society in terms of its potential to undermine healthcare safety and quality, and increase associated costs.

A recent study links increased patient safety risks found at many healthcare institutions in part to the shortage of available nurses. ⁵ In these situations, nurses are being asked to work more hours and cover more patients than they can and still maintain acceptable levels of quality and safety. The shortage of nurses significantly contributes to preventable medical errors, which in addition to the impacts on human health, results in total costs to society estimated at between \$17 billion and \$29 billion per year. ⁶

Healthcare experts across the nation have been studying this complex problem and formulating strategies that balance the needs of healthcare providers with the well being of patients.

Most of the many recent studies of nursing work-related issues call for increasing the number of qualified nurses, improving their pay and benefits, allowing them to focus more of their time on directly treating patients, giving them more say in how they do their work, and helping them achieve a healthier balance between work and the rest of their lives.

Many of these recommendations are similar to those offered by the American Hospital Association's *Commission on Workforce for Hospitals and Health Systems*. This diverse group of healthcare professionals recommended that hospitals focus on integrated approaches that include: (1) enabling healthcare professionals to focus most of their time and talent on meaningful work that directly enhances patient care; (2) value all hospital staff by giving them a "sustained voice" in determining how best to do their jobs; and (3) work with public and private partners to attract, motivate, and retain a larger more diverse pool of talented healthcare workers. ⁷

⁴ "Condition Critical: Who Will Provide Your Nursing Care in Idaho?," the Idaho Commission on Nursing & Nursing Education, 2002

⁵ "Keeping Patients Safe: Transforming the Work Environment of Nurses," a report by the National Academy of Science Institute of Medicine, 11-03.

⁶ "To Err is Human: Building A Safer Health System," a report by the Institute of Medicine, 11-99.

⁷ Page 5 of report referenced in footnote #1.

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Healthcare is first and foremost about people caring for people. This essential human element in the quality of the healthcare we all receive requires serious attention to solving the workforce shortage among nurses and other healthcare professionals who are at the forefront of providing safe, quality care.

St. Luke's Position & Practices

Today, St. Luke's is not experiencing the serious shortage of qualified healthcare professionals afflicting so many hospitals and health systems elsewhere. Currently, physical therapists are the only profession we're finding difficult to attract. There is no shortage of physical therapists in the area, but they have ample opportunities to work in healthcare settings other than hospitals.

In particular, the nursing shortage plaguing much of the nation is not yet a serious problem at St. Luke's. "Our annual nursing vacancy rate is about 4%," says Sharon Lee, vice president of Nursing & Patient Care Services. "Our relatively low number of open nursing positions compares to a national average of about 10-12%, with some hospitals suffering vacancy rates as high as 25%. We try very hard to hire the best nurses and other staff, and then collaborate with them to create a work environment conducive to providing the best possible care."

The quality of nursing care at St. Luke's is recognized as among the very best in the nation. St. Luke's is the only hospital in Idaho and one of only three hospitals among neighboring Northwest states designated as Magnet hospitals. Magnet designation is bestowed on select hospitals by the nation's foremost nursing accreditation and credentialing organization to recognize healthcare organizations that demonstrate sustained excellence in nursing care.⁸

"Earning Magnet status requires a hospital to have created a nursing work environment that offers the very elements necessary to attract and retain high-quality professionals," explains Lee. "We try very hard to take this same approach with all of our healthcare professionals, people we know are essential to St. Luke's reputation for quality care."

For example, St. Luke's does not employ system-wide mandatory overtime practices that are causing nursing problems at some hospitals. Instead, St. Luke's diligently balances work-shift length to avoid overworked nurses adversely impacting patient care. Being on call to work extra hours when circumstances warrant is a requirement of nurses who choose to work in certain procedural and specialized units, but the same overwork-avoidance caution is applied.

St. Luke's success keeping enough qualified nurses is due in no small measure to regularly giving these professionals a say (i.e., "shared governance") in establishing work conditions that meet their needs while ensuring healthcare quality for patients.

⁸ Excerpted from the American Nurses Credentialing Center website at www.nursingworld.org.

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Perhaps the strongest testament to the impact of St. Luke's work environment comes from healthcare professionals themselves.

"Nurses have regular input on issues like work schedules and staffing," says Corey Elliott, an RN who has been with St. Luke's since 1998. "Our leaders listen to us, and everyone at St. Luke's is encouraged to work together as a team to help make an outstanding hospital even better for employees and patients alike."

"It's not hard to recruit nurses here, and they tend to stay for a long time," says six-year nurse Shaynee Mooney. "There's a culture of teamwork and professionalism that helps us manage the demands and increase the rewards of caring for patients and their families. It's a team you want to be part of."

"We feel valued as professionals," says Rick Bassett, an RN at St. Luke's since 1988, most of that time in the Intensive Care Unit. "We get the support and resources we need to do our jobs well, and everyone pitches in to do what's best for the patients. So, even as demanding as nursing can be, you look forward to coming to work every day. That's pretty special in any line of work."

The reputation St. Luke's has earned as the kind of hospital where the best healthcare professionals want to work may go a long way in minimizing here much of the adverse effect the growing healthcare workforce shortage has had on many other communities around the nation.

However, because an adequate supply of qualified healthcare professionals is of such critical importance to everyone in the communities St. Luke's serves, addressing this challenge requires hospitals to work with other interested parties and resources.

For example, St. Luke's helps subsidize nursing programs at Boise State University, Northwest Nazarene University, and Idaho State University to help these institutions train more nursing students. St. Luke's is active in the Idaho Hospital Association and the Idaho Organization for Nurse Executives, two groups working together to find ways of making sure there are an adequate number of qualified nurses. And St. Luke's healthcare professionals spend time in area schools encouraging young people to consider healthcare as a career path.

Only time will tell how much the worldwide shortage of healthcare professionals will ultimately affect our community. In the meantime, St. Luke's continues to do all it can to attract and retain the workforce required to provide the high quality of healthcare our patients have come to expect.

