

Not enough nurses, not enough training slots

2:00 a.m. April 18, 2009

It is a worrisome trend in nursing that many future patients do not realize yet.

In a state with a severe nursing shortage that is only looming larger, educational institutions have blossomed and have expanded their programs. Prospective students, seeing job opportunities, are clamoring to get in and enduring up to four years on waiting lists. Yet, hospitals in San Diego County are straining to provide enough staff members to oversee the required clinic training with actual patients.

California could use half as many additional nurses as it has now to meet demand. A wave of retirements is crashing upon us.

Area colleges are expanding to help meet demand. Southwestern College moved its program into a gleaming new campus on Otay Mesa in the fall of 2007. New entrants into the market include the University of Oklahoma and its respected online program. Our county now has 21 nursing programs at five community colleges, two state colleges, the major private colleges and other proprietary programs.

An estimated 3,000 students are in the pipeline now. Each student needs a clinical laboratory experience, typically in a hospital setting, for each course. About 840 hours of such training. Each student must spend the last semester with a hospital nurse acting as preceptor, or mentor. The student must put in 96 hours over four weeks, assuming 75 percent of the nurse's workload by the end.

These potential grads may have had to achieve 4.0 grades in high school just to get in (San Diego State) or spend years on waiting lists (up to four years at Grossmont College, one and one-half at Southwestern).

An organization called the San Diego Nursing Service-Education Consortium plays matchmaker for educational institutions and hospitals.

The system, frankly, is straining toward the breaking point. Clinical training has become the bottleneck, threatening to slow students from qualifying for graduations, and preventing hospitals from having the labor pool they need.

Debbie Yaddow, head of Grossmont's program, must come up with mentors for her 100 students in the next two weeks. She does not have them – yet.

Cathy McJannet, director of the nursing program at Southwestern College, is fighting mad at times. "I can't teach them to be nurses if they can't get into hospitals."

Many hospitals have frantically added training shifts – days, evenings, nights, weekends. And still nursing program directors call, begging for one more staff member to supervise another unit of eight to ten students.

Pablo Velez is vice president of patient services at Sharp Chula Vista. He also is president of the San Diego chapter of a nurse leaders association. Velez understands the staffing and regulatory challenges that hospitals face in providing training. He also believes that some institutions may not be carrying their share of the load and is leading an effort to have a constructive

WHERE'S THE NURSE?

Number of working RNs per
100,000 people

National Average 798

California Average 566

California's supply situation

Year Supply Demand Shortage

2010 161,337 203,511 -
42,174

2015 153,654 231,711 -
78,057

2020 142,978 263,673 -
120,697

Sources: U.S.Department
Health & Human Resources,
Bureau of Labor Statistics

dialogue.

Meantime, Nancy Saks, director of organization learning and effectiveness at the two-campus Scripps Mercy, is leading an industry task force to at least maintain the current number of placements and hopefully increase it. "There are some real, concrete things we can do to make it better," Saks says.

These include a state-sponsored simulation facility in the Grossmont area to provide simulated training for all area colleges in a mass setting, not just eight or ten at a time. These include more placements at out-patient surgical centers, skilled nursing agencies and community clinics. Another idea is to have two colleges team up to better dovetail their requests.

Some hospitals are starting to favor nursing students in bachelor-degree programs over those in associate-degree programs. But that is not fair. Community college students spend three and one-half years to get their AA degrees and registered nursing licenses. Some will transfer to San Diego State for three more semesters and a bachelor's degree. Others will go after hospital jobs. They are equally qualified. An RN is an RN.

It takes lots of money to finish nursing school. To discriminate against community college programs is to discriminate against socioeconomic segments of the population. How fair is that to anyone when the state may need 120,000 more nurses?

Hospitals must become more aggressive in creating new training slots. Educational institutions must be more imaginative in looking for alternative care settings, even prison health care.

Simulated training with half-million-dollar electronic dummies can accomplish a great deal.

In the end, however, nursing students need humans to work on. And California's hospitals and future patients need well-trained nurses by the hundreds of thousands. It is as simple as that.