

San Diego's Nurses Need Teachers

By Lori Saldaña



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Wednesday, June 17, 2009 | San Diego has a well-earned reputation for being a leader in medical practice and research. Excellent university hospitals, biomedical facilities and research institutes form a core for San Diego's progress in the field of medicine.

Yet, these great institutions could not function without the health professionals, and especially the nurses, that come from San Diego State University, the University of San Diego and San Diego City College.

We've been hearing for quite some time about California's nursing shortage. Within 10 years, the U.S. Bureau of Health Professionals projects the nation's shortage of nurses will exceed 1 million. In California alone, the nursing shortfall will reach 116,600 by 2020, and in Southern California, that shortage is said to be steeper than in other parts of the state.

Every time you enter a hospital your health, even your life, rests in the hand of capable nurses. Nurses distribute medicine, maintain life-sustaining machines and provide a constant flow of information. In some cases, nurses are even called to serve as translators in emergency situations with patients who do

not speak English. In the face of extreme urgency and pressure is the hallmark of a well-trained nurse. Add to that the ability to provide compassion and comfort to patients in need and you have the makings of a great nurse.

Our local colleges and universities are working hard to provide nurses for our hospitals and medical industry. San Diego State University, the largest producer of baccalaureate nurses in the county, graduates 200 nurses into the workforce each year. A major challenge prevents that number from being higher: the lack of nurse educators. Unable to recruit and hire qualified faculty, nursing schools are turning students away at a national rate of tens of thousands per year.

Nursing is the most competitive degree program on many California State University and community college campuses, with some campuses even setting up lotteries to ration out seats in their nursing programs. Thousands of qualified applicants are being turned away or delayed in joining the nursing profession, because we cannot recruit enough faculty with teaching-level degrees.

State Assembly Bill 867 would allow the CSU, the nation's largest public university system, to offer a Doctor of Nursing Practice degree, the degree needed to become a nurse educator. The CSU has always been a leader in training highly-skilled nurses. This bill would help CSU's nursing schools address the nursing shortage by training and educating needed nursing faculty.

According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, the top reason nursing schools in the U.S. turn away applicants is because of a lack of faculty. In fact, in a recent AACN survey more than 60 percent of universities said they needed additional faculty -- and more than half of those required a doctorate level degree for the position. But recruiting and sustaining a nursing faculty with doctorate level education is subject to supply and demand. Too few nurses hold educator-level degrees, and those who do are being enticed to take higher-paying hospital and medical positions.

Having the CSU offer this doctorate will put advanced practice nurses academically at the same level as other clinical practitioners, therefore increasing the desirability of becoming a nurse educator. Currently, nurses are required to spend the same amount of time to obtain a master's degree as many other clinical positions spend to obtain a doctorate level degree.

Another important reason to support this bill is the change that will occur in the educational requirements for nurses. The AACN is phasing out master's level degrees (to be done by 2015) and making the DNP the industry standard for advanced level practitioners. The demand for the degree is expected to rise. If the CSU is not given the ability to provide this degree, the faculty shortage will potentially be even worse in the coming years. Currently only three private universities in California offer this degree, which means the cost of the program is not always affordable and could deter those who want to become nurse educators from pursuing this career path.

But this bill is about much more than a degree -- it is about providing Californians with the high-quality health care that we so desperately need. Baccalaureate-prepared nurses are increasingly sought by hospitals because they have shown to have better patient outcomes when compared to non-baccalaureate nursing staffs. Without the faculty at the CSU level to teach these nursing students, we will perpetuate the nursing shortage and continue down a slippery slope with the health of Californians at risk.

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