

TALKING POINTS

Health Affairs Article on Registered Nurse Supply

On December 5, 2011, the journal *Health Affairs* published an article titled *Registered Nurse Supply Grows Faster than Projected Amid Surge in New Entrants Ages 23-26*, which focused on a large cohort of younger nurses entering the profession and the impact this may have on the future workforce. Funded by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, this study was conducted by Drs. David Auerbach, Peter Buerhaus, and Douglas Staiger who found a 62% increase in the number of 23-26 year olds who became registered nurses (RNs) between 2002 and 2009. Though welcome news given the rapid aging of the nursing workforce, **the study authors do not conclude that nursing shortage is over** given the growing demand for nursing care by older adults, new opportunities for nurses through healthcare reform, and the need for more highly educated RNs.

To this point, the authors recognize the following in the article:

- Considerable uncertainty persists about whether or not interest in nursing will continue to grow in the future.
- The aging of the population is likely to increase demand for RNs at a greater rate than in the past.
- Full implementation of the Affordable Care Act and expanding roles for nurses in primary care will likely increase demand for RNs and result in future shortages.
- Ongoing bottlenecks in nursing education (i.e. faculty shortages, insufficient clinical training sites) could narrow the future pipeline of nurses below optimal levels.

Dr. Auerbach and colleagues also were concerned that though the number of RNs prepared each year is increasing, schools of nursing may not be “preparing the workforce ideally suited for population needs.”

In response to what this new article may mean in relation to the nursing shortage, study co-author Dr. Peter Buerhaus, Director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Health Workforce Studies at the Institute for Medicine and Public Health at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, shared the following comments:

“The surge in young RNs reported in the article is the first really positive news that eventually we might be able to replace the retiring Baby Boom nurses. This replacement, however, is not going to happen over the next few years, and the real impact may not be realized until the next decade. While it is truly fantastic that we are finally seeing some evidence that the supply of RNs is likely to grow, this growth will only occur as long as younger people remain interested in nursing, and there is no guarantee that this will continue.

Further, since we do not know specifically how much the demand for RNs will increase over the next decade, we are truly flying blind with respect to being able to project the size of a future nursing shortage. I personally do not feel confident that even if we are able to sustain

the trends reported in *Health Affairs* that the supply of RNs will match the large increases in demand that are unfolding during this decade.

Taking actions now that would stop the flow into the nursing profession would be very risky and an unwise gamble. By no means does our article come anywhere close to suggesting that we curtail the pipeline of new nurses into the workforce, which may indeed threaten the health of the nation.”

Talking Points

AACN has developed the following talking points to assist deans, faculty, and other stakeholders interested in sharing information about this article and what the findings mean in relation to the ongoing and projected shortage of registered nurses.

- Though the study identifies a large infusion of younger nurses into the profession, the authors do not contrast this gain with the impending wave of RN retirements that has long been projected. With the median age of RNs currently 46 years old and the largest cohort of nurses now in their 50s, a significant portion of the nursing workforce is expected to retire over the next 10-15 years. Without a clear assessment of how many older nurses are leaving the profession compared with the number of younger entrants, it is difficult to determine the size of future shortages.
- Compounding this issue is the fact the current downturn in the economy has disrupted typical RN employment patterns with retired nurses coming back to work and part-time nurses assuming full-time roles. When the economy recovers and old work patterns resume, even more nurses are expected to leave their positions, which will further reduce the supply of working RNs.
- **The study used projections that depend upon continued, robust interest and growth in the number of new nursing professionals entering the pipeline, which may not be the case in the long run. The authors cite “considerable uncertainty” in whether or not this level of interest will persist in the coming years. In fact, misleading reports about the end of the nursing shortage may indeed signal prospective nurses to seek careers in other fields.**
- Though interest in nursing careers remains strong, the demand for nursing services is expected to expand rapidly given the aging of the population and the need to provide care to more than 30 million newly insured citizens following the full implementation of healthcare reform. Diminishing the pipeline of new nurses at this critical junction may leave the nation ill-equipped to meet the emerging demand for nursing care, which could limit access to essential healthcare services.
- Though the overall RN population is increasing, the nursing profession must take steps to ensure that this growth produces nurses with the right competencies that reflect current practice expectations. The Institute of Medicine is calling for at least 80% of the RN population to be baccalaureate prepared by 2020. A concerted effort

must be made to direct funding and resources to programs that produce nurses that satisfy this mandate.

- In addition to the nursing shortage, the projected shortage of physicians will also put a strain on the healthcare system and increase the demands placed on RNs and other providers. By 2020, the Association of American Medical Colleges projects a shortage of more than 90,000 physicians needed to provide primary care and specialty services.
- The healthcare system is transforming and, fortunately, the system is changing in a way that will increasingly reward providers for quality and prevention of avoidable complications, mortality, readmissions, etc. Nurses are vital to an organization's ability to survive, let alone thrive in such an environment, and many more will be needed to implement quality and patient safety measures.

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