

Something's gotta give to avoid an impending RN crisis



ALWAYS ENERGIZING AND INFORMATIVE, the annual ANCC National Magnet Conference® never disappoints. The most recent one, held in Dallas last October, was no exception. In addition to learning how to achieve and maintain Magnet® designation, I had the pleasure of meeting Peter McMenamin, PhD, senior policy fellow and chief economist at the American Nurses Association. What I thought would be a quick introduction turned into a more lengthy discussion about his research on predicted RN retirements—an impending crisis he calls a “tsunami warning.” (See www.ananurse.space.org/blogs/peter-mcmenamin/2014/03/14/rn-retirements-tsunami-warning?ssopc=1.) His description got my attention, and I wanted to know more.

We hear predictions about future nursing shortages all the time, but Peter had a different angle that I thought was valuable and wanted to share with you. I learned from him that if we want to avert a dire nursing shortage, something's gotta give; something has to change. The situation is approaching a crisis point and can't stay the same.

Peter explained that nursing's crisis point may occur sooner than we think. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' revised update of its “Occupational Employment Projections from 2012-2022,” demand for RNs and advanced practice RNs will grow from now until 2022. But the number of RNs aged 64 and older could increase this demand as retirement becomes a reality for hundreds of thousands of RNs during this same period. (See www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.nr0.htm.) The economic downturn starting in 2008, along with certain other factors, caused many nurses to defer retirement. That trend enabled hospitals and other healthcare employers to be more discriminating about which nurses they hired. But the vast majority of these older RNs won't stay in active practice for another 10 years. Peter also mentioned a recent Minnesota study showing accelerated retirement among nurses older than age 62.

What's more, Peter told me, “Hospitals appear to have slowed down their hiring. Total hospital employment declined three straight months from December

2013 to February 2014. The last time that happened was in 1995.” So as RN retirements accelerate and demand for healthcare increases (in large part, due to the aging of the baby boomers), experienced nurses will be in high demand. Every year through the end of this century, 2 to 3 million people will “age in” to Medicare.

So how are we planning for this major shift in RN availability? The industry clearly shows a preference for hiring only the most skilled and knowledgeable nurses—an understandable stance. But we need to start now to devise ways to avert the tsunami ahead. We need to figure out how to increase new nurse-graduate employment and onboarding, develop innovative nurse-retention solutions, and feed the pipeline of new nurses through nursing school partnerships. It's not just about hiring to fill a vacant position. We need to view recruiting and retaining nurses as a vital strategy for a successful future.

Having lived through nursing shortages in the past, we know that keeping a stable, talented nursing workforce requires vision, a continuous effort, and a sustained commitment. Magnet-designated hospitals have that long-term view and outcomes that support their efforts.

So why don't we stop “fad surfing” and waterskating over the developing waves that seem manageable now but represent a crisis in the making? If you haven't seen the data on the impending nursing tsunami, it's worth your attention. Unless we come up with a well-thought-out plan across the healthcare industry, we'll all be crying “Something's gotta give.” Because this time, the nursing shortage is really going to hurt.

Note: Don't miss this month's Magnet Highlights section featuring the latest National Magnet Nurse of the Year® award winners. It's inspiring reading!

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