

Editorial

RN Labor Supply Bubble: What Does it Mean for Rural Health Care?

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A recent article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (Staiger, Auerbach, & Buerhaus, 2012) noted that the Registered Nurse (RN) labor supply is likely in a bubble with an oversupply of full time RNs. These authors note that health care employment is often countercyclical in nature. This means in times of a poor economy the number of health care positions grow, since a larger labor force is available. Those nurses who are employed may delay retiring or leaving the job market to continue their education since they have a steady source of income. The nurse may be the sole bread winner if other family members are unemployed, and those who were part-time are more likely to want to work full time to increase income stream in a poor economy. What does this mean to rural nursing?

It may mean that rural health care facilities have a larger supply of RNs to choose from and they can be more competitive with their urban counterparts. However, extreme caution is advised. As the economy improves, and it always does, the pressures to stay in the work force will ease for current RNs. We know there will be a large number of RNs retiring in the next few years. In addition, those of us who are Baby Boomers are aging and will have increased health care needs in the future. If plans for the changes in healthcare with the Affordable Care act hold through the Supreme Court challenges, many more Americans will have health care coverage and it follows that they will use that coverage to seek care. This is expected to lead to more health care positions including those for RNs in all levels but particularly in advanced practice positions.

Nursing is one of the most flexible types of health care disciplines in terms of types of positions. Nurses work in clinics, home health, public health, nursing education, school and industry as well as acute care. In rural nursing there is a need for what I term the “Consummate Generalist”. The role of the rural nurse is broad and you need a broad and deep knowledge base to practice in this environment. *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health* report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and Robert Wood Johnson foundation (IOM, 2011) discuss several ways to ensure a strong role for nursing in advancing health care in this country. They specifically address rural nursing in a number of ways, chief among these the use of residency programs to assure a smooth transition from education to practice settings in rural environments, easing educational transitions to baccalaureate and higher education, and assuring that nurses can practice to the full of extent of their education and experience particularly in advanced practice roles.

This time of a more abundant supply of RNs is a time for rural areas to strengthen the ranks of rural nurses. I would implore rural facilities and those of you in leadership positions in rural areas to use the time when RNs are available to look ahead and make plans that ensure an adequate supply of RNs in the future for your facilities and communities. Use this time to reduce professional isolation, provide training that assists both individual nurses and the organization in growth to provide the best possible health care.

Staiger and colleagues (2012) predict that over the next several years this bubble of abundance of RNs will deflate if not burst. As nurses we have seen it before, the cycle of a nurse shortage replaced with predictions that the shortage is over, only to find the next cycle of shortages even worse. Hopefully those that employ RNs will be able to look at history and use

this time of adequate nursing labor supply to prepare for the future, to prepare for a role for nurses that allows them to use their skills to the full extent of their scope of practice.

References

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