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Innovative solutions to the nursing shortage

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The nursing shortage was already a front-line healthcare issue, but the COVID-19 pandemic has added fuel to the fire. During 2020-2021, the number of employed nurses aged 25-34 and 35-44 years old decreased by 5.2% and 7.4%, respectively.² In stark contrast, there was an increase of nearly 22% in the number of employed nurses 65 years and older.² This increase is due in large part to the pre-existing nursing shortage that was exacerbated by COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths.⁴ Despite the valiant efforts of nurses across the country, the truth remains that the U.S. is suffering from a substantial nursing shortage. A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2017 reports that by 2030, the demand for nurses will increase to over 3.6 million. To reach this goal, on top of the existing workforce, the nursing field should have recruited an additional 50,000 new nurses annually since 2014. Unfortunately, we are presently falling behind this goal, emphasizing the urgency of the situation.² The average nurse in the U.S. is 51 years old, and as a result, mass retirement of nurses could cause an even greater spike in demand.⁶ In addition to retirement, many nurses have grown fatigued with their profession. Burnout and stress have caused many nurses to seriously consider leaving their profession for a less demanding job.⁶ For the U.S. to adequately deal with COVID-19 and any future pandemics, it is imperative that more nurses are added to the workforce. Two solutions for addressing this issue involve promoting interest in the field of nursing and expanding nursing school capacity to accommodate more students.

One of the underlying root causes of the nursing shortage is that many qualified students are unable to enter nursing school due to administrative difficulties.¹ In 2019, over 90,000 qualified nursing school applicants were turned away because nursing schools were not adequately staffed. Some schools lack the number of faculty required to teach classes, while others do not have enough clinical sites to facilitate hands-on training for new students.¹ By promoting funding for nursing education, state and federal governments can combat the nursing shortage. Increased funding will enable nursing schools to bolster their resources, ultimately mitigating the existing shortage and fostering a robust nursing workforce.

In October 2022, David Ige, the governor of Hawaii, provided approximately \$2 million in state funds to the University of Hawaii. The university hopes to use these funds to hire more nursing faculty so more students can be trained. By allocating these funds, the University of Hawaii's administration is attempting to address faculty shortages that resulted in approximately 65% of applicants being denied acceptance in 2021. This strategic investment is projected to double the number of students who will successfully matriculate into their program.⁵ This initiative in Hawaii, spearheaded by both the state and the University of Hawaii, can serve as a template for other institutions across the nation. With the state backing of nursing programs, more applicants will be able to enter the profession and make an impact on healthcare.

Furthermore, assuming that nursing schools are equipped to accommodate a greater influx of students, it becomes imperative to foster an environment that encourages students from an early age to consider nursing as a viable and rewarding career path. In addition, programs that streamline training time can enhance the appeal of nursing by making it a more financially viable option.

A local example of this idea put into action comes by way of a partnership between George Washington University (GWU) and Alexandria City Public Schools. Both institutions have partnered to allow high school students to take dual enrollment courses with GWU. Upon completion of these classes consisting of 18 credit hours, the students will receive a Clinical Nursing Assistant certification. This program allows students to acquire early exposure to nursing and allows them to work as nursing assistants after graduating high school. Survey results from program graduates show that 80-90% of students want to continue in the healthcare field.³ Programs that expose students to nursing can be a crucial method by which the nursing shortage is addressed.

The nursing shortage in America is a complicated, multi-factorial problem. No one solution will allow nursing employment to match nursing demand. However, two pertinent factors that play a role in this crisis are the lack of teaching faculty and a lack of interest in the field. By using state and federal funds to employ nursing professors, nursing schools can bring in more students. Furthermore, programs that foster interest in nursing at an early age are critical for maintaining a steady influx of applicants year after year. These strategies can hopefully turn the tide against the nursing shortage and consequently improve patient care.

The authors have no conflicts to report

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