

NURSING FACT SHEET

Nursing

- Nurses comprise the nation's largest health care profession. There are more than three million registered nurses (RNs) nationwide.¹
- More than 581,500 new nursing positions will be created through 2018 (a 22 percent increase) making nursing the nation's top profession in terms of job growth.²
- Registered nurses typically prepare for professional practice through a four-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN), a three-year hospital diploma program, or a two-year to three-year Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN). Driven by the need for more baccalaureate-level nurses due to the growing complexity of health care, the percentage of RNs with BSN degrees grew from 22 percent in 1980 to 34 percent in 2008.³ However, the majority of RNs continue to enter nursing from community colleges.

Impact of Nurse Staffing and Education on Patient Care

- The shortage of registered nurses, in combination with an increased workload, poses a threat to quality of care. Increases in RN staffing are associated with reductions in hospital-related mortality and failure to rescue as well as reduced lengths of stays, according to a metaanalysis of existing studies.⁴
- In a 2002 study reported in JAMA, University of Pennsylvania researchers reported that patients who have common surgeries in hospitals with the worst nurse staffing levels have up to a 31 percent increased chance of dying.⁵
- A higher proportion of nursing care provided by RNs and a greater number of hours of care by RNs per day are associated with better outcomes for hospitalized patients, according to a study published in the New England Journal of Medicine in 2002.⁶ Similarly, a 2003 study found that surgical patients had a "substantial survival advantage" if treated in hospitals with higher proportions of nurses with a BSN or higher degree. Every 10 percent increase in proportion of BSN nurses in hospitals had a resulting four percent decrease in risk of death.^{7;8}
- A 2008 study published in *Health Services Research* confirms the findings of the previous studies which link educational level and patient outcomes.⁹
- Americans are aware of the nursing shortage and believe that the availability of nurses is a critical factor in the quality of hospital care.¹⁰

Factors Contributing to an Evolving Nursing Shortage

- In 2008 the RN average age was 47 years.¹¹
- Over the next 20 years, the average age of the RN will increase and the size of the workforce will plateau as large numbers of RNs retire. Because demand for RNs is expected to increase during this time, a large and prolonged shortage of nurses is expected to hit the US in the latter half of the next decade.¹² The RN shortage will continue to evolve if current trends continue,

including a growing and aging population, high demand for quality health care, an RN workforce approaching retirement age, and difficulties attracting new nurses and retaining the existing workforce.¹³

- Nursing schools are turning away qualified applicants to baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs. In 2008, 99,000 qualified applicants were turned away from nursing programs due to lack of faculty and other resource constraints.¹⁴
- Nursing schools are unable to accommodate qualified applicants due to faculty shortages and insufficient clinical sites, classrooms, clinical preceptors and budget constraints.¹⁵
- Faculty shortages were cited by 71.4 percent respondents to an American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) survey as a reason for turning away qualified applicants for entry-level nursing programs.¹⁶ The faculty shortage promises to worsen as faculty age continues to climb. For 2007-2008, the average ages of doctoral-prepared nurse faculty holding the ranks of professor, associate professor, and assistant professor were 60.1, 56.9, and 52.1 years, respectively.¹⁷

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