

Erickson Column: A cure for the nursing shortage

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Although some nurse job seekers are finding that a tough economy means less job options, this appears to be temporary. Currently, as hospitals and other medical providers experience the same economic downturn as the rest of us, the national nursing crisis may be on a hiatus. However, as a recent Washington Post article explained, “The economic downturn has put a Band-Aid on one of the most vexing problems in health care, a shortage of nurses that has slowed care at some hospitals and forced others to turn away the ill.”

Once the economy picks up steam and rights itself, it appears likely that we and our aging baby boom population in particular will face a nursing shortage that is more severe than ever. Hopefully, we’ll have more citizens deciding that nursing is the field for them, especially given the demand. One other solution involves the reform of our immigration system so that U.S. employers can hire foreign-born nurses in a timelier manner.

Due to increased population growth in recent decades, Prince William County and the rest of Northern Virginia have suffered acutely from this dearth of health care professionals. A shortage of nurses means higher costs to patients and a lowered standard of care. Not having enough nurses also constricts economic growth, as businesses must locate in areas that can provide adequate medical staffing and other services for their employees. In 2005, the Northern Virginia Health Care Workforce Alliance (NVHCWA), a coalition of private sector, business, government, community, health care and educational leaders, published a study finding that there is a current shortage of 2,763 health care workers in Northern Virginia that is expected to grow to 7,791 by 2010 and to 16,595 by 2020.

As the baby boomer population slides into its mid-60s and the growth of the U.S. population outpaces projections, the resources of our health care industry are becoming increasingly strained. Federal experts forecast that the nursing shortage will grow to 275,000 by 2010 and to 1 million in the following decade. This shortage is not solely linked to a lack of interest in nursing, but also the lack of instructors to teach the necessary skills to become a nurse.

These statistics should come as no surprise. Studies discussing the baby boomer burden on nursing were published as early as 2000 in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

To ease the shortage of nurses in the U.S., hospitals and nonprofit groups are turning to innovative recruitment and retention programs for nurses. Locally, Potomac Hospital in Woodbridge offers full scholarships to area nursing students who agree to work for the hospital after graduation. INOVA Fairfax Hospital sponsors a children's summer camp to promote interest in the nursing field and has created programs to improve the overall quality of life for nurse employees. The NVHCWA works to implement programs that recruit and retain health care professionals, including promoting careers in health care to middle school-, high school- and college-age students. These programs and other education initiatives should help cultivate more American-born nurses in the long run, but a change in immigration regulations would ease the more acute nursing shortage that has been predicted.

Under current immigration laws, it's difficult for U.S. hospitals to turn to the international nursing population to fill the shortage. The most recent "relief" offered in response to the nursing shortage was the Nursing Relief for Disadvantaged Areas Reauthorization Act of 2005. The 2005 Act expires in December 2009. Under the Act, a nurse can only qualify for an H-1C non-immigrant visa if he or she is going to work for one of the 14 qualified sponsor hospitals, none of which are in the Northern Virginia area. Other types of visas for nurses are extremely limited as well. With the expiration of the 2005 Act coming later this year, a proposal for immigration relief has yet to be considered.

Additionally, the Obama administration has made it clear that health care reform is a key agenda item. In order for health care reform to even be viable, an increased medical work force will be required. So relaxing the restrictive immigration rules for foreign nurses will accomplish more than one goal. Not only would this help to relieve the nursing shortage and provide care to those in need under our current health care system, but it would also set the groundwork for the much-needed reform in the health care industry. And as a practical matter, foreign nurses create a more diverse nursing workforce, where multi-cultural and multi-lingual skills have proven necessary and are invaluable.

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