

Health Care and Nursing at a Crossroads

Health Care Crisis

The United States is facing a nationwide health care crisis. Recent federal predictions show that by 2015, one in every five U.S. dollars that Americans spend will be used for health care, and the nation's annual health care spending will total more than \$4 trillion. The scope of the crisis is reaching record proportions and touches the lives of Americans from all backgrounds, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, education, employment, or age.

At a time when more patients are struggling to access the health care they need, nurses—the central providers of patient care—are leaving the bedside. The average patient is attended to by a nurse for 6.3 hours every day.

Nursing Crisis

- **Demand Outpacing Supply.** While recent projections show that the number of employed nurses will increase by more than 700,000 between 2004 and 2014, it is also anticipated that 1.2 million nurses will be required in order to fill both new and vacated nurse slots over the course of that decade (U.S. Department of Labor).
- **Nurses Leaving Nursing.** Chronic short staffing, low wages, and mandatory overtime have made it close to impossible for nurses to deliver the care their patients need. Nearly 500,000 registered nurses are currently working outside of nursing, and of these, more than 40 percent have left the profession for reasons related to the workplace, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- **Poor Job Satisfaction.** In 2001, the U.S. Government Accountability Office concluded that poor job satisfaction—including low pay—was the key to an emerging nurse shortage. The study described the developing supply issue as one of a shortage of nurses “available or willing” to accept employment under currently offered pay and working conditions.
- **Recruiting Difficulties.** In addition, the American Hospital Association stated in 2004 that 40 percent of hospitals reported that it has become even more difficult in the past year to recruit more nurses.
- **Impact on Patient Care.** The shortage of nurses has tremendous implications for the quality of patient care in our nation's hospitals. In 2002, a study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that 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.

Dedicated, professional nurses are critical to improving the quality of patient care in America and reducing health care costs. By helping attract more nurses back into the profession, families nationwide will benefit.