Study: Uptick in younger RNs boosts workforce

A new study brings welcome news of a surprising uptick of young people entering nursing, suggesting the RN workforce will grow faster than anticipated over the next 20 years. A second study finds new RNs stick close to home for nursing school and jobs, raising questions about how to improve the supply in underserved areas.

Both studies are in the December 2011 *Health Affairs*.

The first study found that the number of 23- to 26-year-olds entering nursing increased 62% from 2002 to 2009—a big turnaround from the previous 2 decades.

National efforts to promote nursing are thought to be one reason. The researchers also credit an atmosphere that makes it easier for professionals to enter nursing, including associate degree programs and accelerated nursing degrees targeted to those in other fields.

If today’s young nurses follow the same employment patterns as those who preceded them, they will be the largest RN cohort ever, the researchers say. If interest in nursing continues, they project the nursing workforce will grow at roughly the same rate as the population through 2030.

Since 2002, the number of young RNs has grown at a rate not seen since the 1970s, report the researchers, David I. Auerbach, PhD; Douglas O. Staiger, PhD; and nursing workforce expert Peter I. Buerhaus, PhD, RN.

The impact of this trend on future nursing shortages is hard to predict, they say. It is not clear whether the growth will continue or meet specific needs, such as RNs trained in geriatric care. The health care needs of the population are also hard to predict.

New RNs don’t move much

Nearly 80% of new RNs attended their first nursing degree program in the state where they graduated from high school, and more than half work within 40 miles of their high school, finds a study by Christine T. Kovner, PhD, RN, professor at the College of Nursing, New York University, and colleagues, using data from a survey of 1,765 newly licensed RNs in 15 states.

Next to teaching, they found, nursing is one of the least mobile professions for women.

Though the reasons for geographic immobility are unclear, the authors say the findings are useful for policy makers seeking to increase the RN supply in specific locales.

To ensure an adequate RN workforce for underserved areas, they recommend:

• expanding the number of nursing programs in these areas
• funding programs that provide incentives to young people in underserved areas to attend nursing school
• supporting extension programs from accredited nursing schools
• reviewing admission policies for nursing programs and financial aid in these areas.

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References