Projections made about a decade ago told us to expect that the RN workforce would peak at around 2.2 million in 2012 and would then begin to shrink as nurses reached retirement age. Instead, say the authors of a recent Health Affairs report, there were 2.7 million RNs working in 2012—500,000 more than anticipated.

Judging by the results of this year’s OR Manager Annual Salary/Career Survey (cover story), staffing in hospitals and ambulatory surgery centers (ASCs) is fairly stable. About two-thirds of our hospital survey respondents say staff turnover and the number of open RN and surgical technologist positions have stayed the same in the past year, and about 70% of our ASC respondents say likewise.

Why have earlier projections not come true, and what does this mean for the future?

The Health Affairs authors say that between 2002 and 2012, US nursing education programs nearly doubled, from around 74,000 to 181,000. Furthermore, some RNs who might have been expected to retire instead continued to work because of the 2007-2009 recession and the subsequent sluggish economy. But even apart from the recession, later retirement has become the trend over the past 4 decades.

Using the Current Population Survey and the American Community Survey, the authors analyzed data for employed RNs aged 23 to 69 for the period 1969-2012. They found that the typical retirement age of 65 or 66 in the 1980s rose to age 68 or 69 by 2000.

According to the 2008 National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses, the proportion of RNs working in hospitals varied by age group: at age 30, 85% of them were hospital employed, but that dropped to 50% at age 50 and to 35% at age 65.

As for other RNs over 65, many are working in nonhospital settings, the authors say, such as nursing homes, ambulatory care settings, or schools. They note that baby boomers will ultimately retire and there may be a resulting shortage of RNs, but that shortage should be offset by the growing number of new nurses.

But what about the OR? Our survey respondents say that few positions currently are open, but filling them with experienced nurses is more difficult than in the past. And as noted in our Special Report: Education (OR Manager, August 2014), the unique environment of the OR demands specialized skills—not just clinical knowledge but also critical thinking. Few schools of nursing offer this specialized education, and facilities vary widely in their approaches to staffing their ORs.

Among perioperative services leaders, just 4% of our hospital survey respondents say they plan to retire in 2014, but 68% say they plan to retire between 2015 and 2024. So it would seem that we can expect an ever-widening gap of OR nurse leaders and staff alike.

The overall nursing workforce may not be shrinking, but chances are the staffing challenges expressed by our survey respondents aren’t going away any time soon. ✩ Elizabeth Wood

Reference
Auerbach D I, Buerhaus P I, Staiger D O. Registered nurses are delaying retirement, a shift that has contributed to recent growth in the nurse workforce. Health Affairs. Published online July 17, 2014.