TRAVELING NURSES AND A LOOMING NURSE SHORTAGE

The growing general-practice physician shortage in Oregon and across the country has become a troubling issue. Fewer new MDs are opting to become family practitioners or internists, preferring instead to go into diverse medical specialty practice areas. But many don't realize that a shortage of qualified nurses also exists, and that shortage is growing so rapidly it equals or may even overshadows the lack of physicians in upcoming decades. An aging baby boomer population, placing increasing demands on the medical profession, and a nursing faculty that is rapidly aging out combine to exacerbate this dilemma.

Who do hospitals and some physicians' offices turn to for help with this predicament? Traveling nurses, or "travelers," as the profession dubs them, are called in to fill gaps caused by full-time nurse employees who are out on leave, for specialized training or to fill in during peak patient periods.

Hospitals hire travelers through a number of national agencies that recruit qualified female and male nurses who enjoy the freedom of working temporarily in various locations. The agencies pay travelers' salaries, find and pay for temporary housing and also offer a variety of benefits, including medical, dental, vision and life insurance.

Travelers average about 12 weeks in a given location, giving them ample time to explore whatever the area has to offer and to travel home for short periods if they wish. Salaries are competitive with permanent-employee nurses, and in cases where travelers have specialized training and multiple years of experience, they earn even more.

Locally, PeaceHealth RiverBend in Springfield, PeaceHealth Sacred Heart in Eugene and the McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center all use travel nurses on a regular basis to fill in during shortages. Beginning this past summer, nurses and physicians within the PeaceHealth system throughout Oregon had to undergo extensive training on learning an electronic medical records (EMR) system that involved 5,000 employees and relied extensively on travelers to fill in staff needs in the interim.

"Travelers were a huge part of the success filling in the gaps while the training went on," says Jane Renken, vice president of talent development for PeaceHealth and the executive in charge of the effort. EMR training was completed on Oct. 1.

McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center chose not to participate in this story. And the state's nursing union, the Oregon Nurses Association, has no problem with travel nurses, recognizing their "intermittent assignments as very valuable," according to Susan King, the association's executive director.

Although traveling nurses have always been around, the need for their services has become more urgent as the population ages, and with it, attendant needs for medical care. In addition, overall university-level nursing faculty is aging as well, with many newly graduated and licensed nurses opting for jobs in clinics and hospitals, where the pay is significantly higher than pay for nursing faculty.

These statistics tell the story: Out of the state of Oregon's total nursing faculty of 720, 12 percent are age 65 and over; 42 percent are between the ages of 55-64; and 23 percent are between 45-54.

About a third of all nurse educators plan to retire within five years, and out of those who plan to continue working for six to 10 years, 20 percent more will retire, according to a 2014 survey by the Oregon Center for Nursing.

Of course, looming retirement is to be expected for these mostly baby boomer-age nurses. The irony is that retiring boomer nurses will need increased medical care as they age at the same time as fewer nurses are being produced to treat them. Why? Because the pipeline of nurses who wish to teach in university nursing programs is slowly drying up.

And while there are a few other reasons, such as a desire for more manageable workloads than teaching provides or a desire to return to patient-focused practice, nearly half (46 percent) of the nurses in the survey cited pay inequity as a reason they would avoid teaching as a profession.

Nurse educators simply don't make as much money as nurses working in hospital and medical office settings. In Oregon, an average salary for a nurse educator is about $71,000 per year, while RNs earn an average of about $81,000 per year, and highly trained nurse practitioners earn an average of almost $109,000 per year.

With dwindling educators and fewer nurses entering the profession, hospitals and those in them may be in for some rough times in coming decades. ■

CORRINA WELDING

"I grew up on the creek," says Lane County native Corrina Welding, "out past Pleasant Hill on Lost Creek Road, a mile from the dead end." Her father, Alfie Welding, was a welder. He had a structural steel construction business and managed a crew of employees, working mostly in Eugene and Springfield. He was also a Vietnam veteran who had been exposed to the insecticide Agent Orange. He developed cancer years later and died in 2010 at age 59. Following graduation from Pleasant Hill High School, Welding studied at the Cascade Institute of Massage and Body Therapies. "I've been doing deep tissue massage for 20 years," she says. "I've been told it's the deepest people have seen. My brother thinks I should work for the government to get secrets." After 12 years at Healing Spirit Integrative Health Center, she opened a private practice in January 2016. "I started doing massage for veterans for free," she says. "I've always wanted to help vets. I saw what my dad went through." During November of 2016, she is offering a free massage to any vet, and she has an ongoing sliding scale for veterans. Find her online at corrinaweldinglmt.com. "I've seen a huge improvement in their range of motion and pain level," she reports. "It can help them get through emotional stuff like PTSD." A marriage that has now ended left Welding with two daughters, 26-year-old Chelsea, herself a mom, and 16-year-old Isabella, a junior at South Eugene High. Her children have sparked a second part-time career as a self-taught child and family photographer. View her portraits at corrinaweldingphotography.com.