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For Your Health's Sake

Nursing Shortage Across The US: HMH Meets The Challenge

(Huntsville, TX) – Since Florence Nightingale professionalized nursing in the 19th century, we have had cyclical nursing shortages, especially during times of war. In the past, whenever the demand for nurses exceeded the supply, more nurses were recruited and trained, and the shortages were quickly repaired. Today's 21st century nursing shortage is different. It is more severe and much more difficult to fix than previous nursing shortages.

Estimations vary according to the type of analysis used, but nearly all experts agree that US healthcare will have a shortfall of somewhere around 1 million nurses by the year 2020. Today, there are over 120,000 unfilled openings for nurses in hospitals and other healthcare settings, despite the fact that as recently as the 1990's we had a relative surplus of nurses.

There are several reasons for the suddenness and severity of the current nursing shortage:

- Fewer people choosing nursing as a profession. Nursing has traditionally been one of the few female professions. Today, women have more and better professional opportunities and fewer are choosing nursing. There are more men in nursing than ever before, but it is difficult to attract men to the profession because of the relative pay scale deficit of a traditionally female profession.
- Retirement of baby boomer nurses. At the same time that fewer nurses are entering the profession, many are leaving due to retirement. One source says that 55% of today's nurses will retire by 2020, and there are not enough new nurses available to replace them.
- Nurses leaving the profession. Nursing burnout is reaching epidemic proportions for the same reasons that it is difficult to attract new nurses to the profession. Nursing is exceedingly stressful, physically demanding and exhausting.
- Shortage of nursing faculty. Until late in the 20th century, nurses were mostly taught by physicians and nurses with hospital diplomas or bachelor's degrees.

There were few graduate-level programs and virtually no doctoral programs in nursing and most nurses were trained in hospital-based programs. The minimum educational requirement for a nursing educator is a MSN (Master of Science in Nursing). MSN level nurses are also in demand as nursing leaders, clinical specialists and nurse practitioners—and those positions are much more lucrative than teaching is. Thus, there is a critical shortage of nursing educators, and that shortage is the greatest barrier to relieving the current nursing shortage. Nursing schools are only able to accept a fraction of their qualified applicants each year because of faculty shortages.

- This nursing shortage is a global shortage. In the past, hospitals have been able to fill nursing vacancies by hiring “foreign nurses” who were educated in other countries. Today’s shortage is global; all developed and undeveloped countries are experiencing a shortage of nurses, so there is nowhere to recruit them from.
- Increasing demand. At this same critical juncture when we have large numbers of nurses retiring and are unable to recruit and educate enough nurses to replace them, the baby boomer generation is aging and requiring more healthcare, putting additional strain on an already overburdened healthcare system.

Strategies to address the critical shortage of nurses must remedy at least some of the reasons for the shortage. Some factors cannot be addressed—the baby boomers will age, will require healthcare and will retire. We can, however, address other issues that contribute to the nursing shortage and it is essential that we do so, as quickly as possible.

- Attracting new people to the profession. Although this has been the first and only strategy needed to correct past nursing shortages, it is not the *first* thing we need to do this time. We currently have more qualified applicants to nursing schools than we can educate. As we correct other problems, however, we will need to attract bright young people to the profession. Nursing must become as attractive a career option as other professions.
- Recruiting inactive nurses. In a 2000 study, about 12% of the nation’s nurses were “inactive:” not employed as nurses and not looking for work in the field. Some are employed in other fields and some are taking a career break. Inactive nurses are a neglected reservoir of educated, experienced professionals.
- Educating educators. The lack of nursing educators is a huge bottleneck in solving the nursing shortage. We must create incentives that will attract graduate-level nurses into education. That includes increasing educator salaries so that colleges can compete with other employers and subsidizing advanced education for nurses who commit to teaching for a period of time.

The 21st century nursing shortage is, indeed, different from all previous nursing shortages. It is more severe and, unless we act quickly to correct it, it will cause a healthcare crisis of cataclysmic proportions. Hospitals and other healthcare organizations cannot continue to provide services without nurses. As the shortage worsens, more and more people will be denied access to healthcare simply because there will be no one to provide it.

At Huntsville Memorial Hospital, we have developed our strategies to combat the nursing shortage. One of the best kept secrets in Walker County is Huntsville Memorial Hospital's nursing school. The Joe G. Davis School of Vocational Nursing is a one-year, hospital-based program which prepares students to take the Vocational Nursing Licensure Examination in order to become a Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN). In the 43 years since its inception, the Joe G. Davis School of Vocational Nursing program has graduated over 500 nurses, and many of the program's graduates have joined the HMH staff after graduation.

Huntsville Memorial Hospital has also partnered with Sam Houston State University to offer student the chance to earn a Bachelors of Science in Nursing (BSN). The Nursing program at Sam Houston State University (SHSU) received initial approval from the Texas Board of Nursing on October 21, 2010. Twenty-four students were admitted to the newly-approved program in January 2011. Thirty-five students will be admitted for Fall 2011.

At Huntsville Memorial Hospital, we also understand the importance of educating our staff to grow within the profession of nursing. Our talented Chief Nursing Officer, Donna Stewart is committed to taking our staff to the next level. She has exciting new ideas and innovative solutions that will be a great asset for us as we continue to meet the needs of our patients and develop Huntsville Memorial Hospital into an industry leader. She has hired top educators that combine clinical expertise and a passion for teaching into rich and rewarding careers. These educators ensure that our staff is prepared to meet the demand of the ever changing healthcare arena. I am confident that our dedicated nursing staff, with their advanced up to the minute capabilities and passionate, down to earth approach, will continue to be leaders in healthcare and meet the needs of this community.

Sally Nelson
Chief Executive Officer
Huntsville Memorial Hospital