

Nurses, Biomed Examine Ways to Relieve Labor Shortages

Staff shortages in both the nursing and biomed fields are a growing problem nationwide. The past decade has seen a flurry of activity by associations, industry, and government to tackle the nursing shortage. Concurrent with the lack of nurses is an increased focus on improving patient care, and many assert that the lack of nurses is inextricably linked to patient safety. Perhaps the biomed shortage is not as dire, but its

broader implications have not grabbed the attention of policymakers or the media.

There are currently more than 125,000 nurse vacancies in hospitals across the country.

Although nationwide data on vacant biomed jobs is not readily available, many health

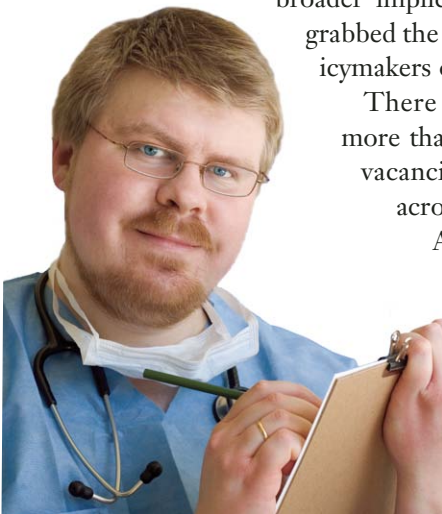
care facilities report that it can take six months or longer to find qualified, experienced candidates.

Job dissatisfaction is often cited as the biggest problem in retaining nurses. Their complaints include time spent on non-direct care activities, mandatory overtime, patient lifting hazards, and staff-to-patient ratios. Employers report that biomed jobs are difficult to attract because of the low visibility the profession has with job applicants entering the field. In addition, the information technology (IT) field has also attracted many technicians with higher salaries.

Efforts to address the nursing shortage have focused on both recruitment and retention. Five years ago, for example, the state of Maryland established a Statewide Commission on the Crisis in Nursing, charged with determining the extent and long-term implications of the shortage, as well as finding ways to reverse the trend. Strategies identified include evaluating scholarship programs and other funding mechanisms.

In 2002, the federal Nurse Reinvestment Act, which authorizes new programs to increase the number of nurses and the quality of nursing services, was signed into law. It provides scholarships for nursing students, offers grants to nursing schools, creates nurse retention and patient safety enhancement grants, and provides for a public service announcement campaign to promote the nursing profession. In the private sector, Johnson & Johnson has established a web site to help nurses cope with the shortage. It includes information on nursing specialties, salaries, and scholarships, and even a request for inspiring nursing stories.

The jury is still out on whether any of these programs are effective, but in the meantime, biomed professionals may want to look at some of these potential solutions to help solve the profession's employment shortage. Because an increasing number of students are choosing to train in computers instead of biomedical equipment, biomed professionals might look at ways to lure students back to BMET programs, including scholarships and loan forgiveness programs. ■



Men Encouraged to Apply for RN Positions

Results of a recent survey conducted by the health care division of the Bernard Hodes Group, provider of staffing solutions, reveal nursing as a viable career option for men. Only six percent of the U.S. nurse workforce is comprised of men. Overwhelmingly, the respondents (498 men in the nursing profession) reported that helping people and the ability to make a meaningful contribution to society are the top rewards of their careers. Most of the men said if they had to do it all over again, they would still enter the profession.