

Academic Progression in Nursing: an Investment in Better Patient Outcomes

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With the influx of more complex, chronic diseases, an aging, growing and more diverse population in Washington State, the knowledge and competencies necessary for nurses to do their jobs are expanding. Nurses must advance their education to provide care coordination for patients and families across the continuum of care, provide clinical leadership, use research to find evidence for care decisions, to teach patients and families, and champion system improvements. Nurses

are currently the least-educated healthcare professionals nationally, yet are expected to lead quality and major change efforts, analyze clinical outcomes data, and manage populations' care. In addition, we have a critical nursing faculty shortage in Washington; to replace retiring faculty, we must have nurses with at least a master's degree to teach at community colleges and universities.

The 2010 Institute of Medicine report, "The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health," which is the blueprint for planning and redesigning nursing in our country, recommends that we raise the percentage of nurses who hold BSN or higher degrees to 80 percent by 2020 to produce safe, quality care and respond to a changing health care system. With the help of a two-year \$300,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Academic Progression in Nursing (APIN), the Washington Center for Nursing is leading this educational initiative in our state. While many urban parts of Washington State are on track to progression, with about a 60-percent BSN-prepared nurse

rate, many regions, specifically rural areas, are falling behind with only about 30 percent of nurses with a BSN or higher. The national goal mirrors the 2008 goal identified in the Master Plan for Nursing Education in WA State, moving us toward a more highly educated nursing workforce. We have been on this educational progression course for several years; we want to assure nurses that we're interested also in their personal, professional and economic success by making education available to them.

Bachelor and higher education prepares nurses to understand health policy, public health and community health, cultivates leadership and advanced communication skills, and introduces nurses to research, a crucial part of understanding and managing chronic illnesses to prevent acute care episodes and disease progression.

In the October 2012 issue of *Medical Care*, researchers from the University Of Pennsylvania School Of Nursing reported finding that surgical patients in hospitals with Magnet status, the healthcare organizations distinguished for

quality patient care and nursing excellence and innovation, had 14 percent lower odds of inpatient death within 30 days than patients cared for in non-Magnet hospitals. (In our state, the University of Washington Medical Center, Providence St. Peter Hospital and Seattle Children's hold Magnet status.) Lead author Dr. Matthew D. McHugh, a public health policy expert at Penn Nursing, attributed the outcomes in large part to investments in highly qualified and highly educated nurses, including a higher proportion of nurses with BSN degrees, and practice environments supportive of high-quality nursing care.

Employers can play a crucial role in achieving the goal for Washington State by supporting and encouraging nurses, creating expectations and providing support. Nurses are more likely to succeed if they have a system of support around them. The IOM recommends that employers facilitate educational progression by offering tuition reimbursement, creating a culture that encourages continuing education, creating

scheduling flexibility and providing a salary differential and promotion. Many employers of nurses in Washington State already do this, because they understand that it's in the patients' interest that nurses are highly educated and well-prepared.

We are working to expand nursing education capacity at all levels. Funds from the APIN grant have supported the creation of three new RN-to-BSN programs: St. Martin's University started admitting students in the fall of 2012 and Western Washington University expects to admit their first students this fall; Wenatchee Valley College is in its initial planning stage, and Bellevue College's proposal is in review with a potential fall 2013 launch. UW Bothell and Everett Community College just announced their 1+2+1 program to expedite BSN completion, also beginning this fall. Every community college nursing program has an agreement with at least one WA-approved BSN program to make the move from ADN to BSN smooth and efficient. We are making progress confirming the expectations of competencies

in both Washington State nursing education and practice, so expectations of what nurses know and can do are similar across the state.

An investment in a nurse's learning is an investment in better patient outcomes. We will continue to collaborate with nursing schools to further expand BSN capacity to ensure that all RNs have an opportunity to advance their education. It's critical that we work together to champion a culture that encourages engaging nurses in lifelong learning and advancement so they are well equipped to manage care for us and our loved ones now and in the future.

Linda Tieman is the Executive Director of the Washington Center for Nursing in Seattle, WA. The mission of the Washington Center for Nursing is to contribute to the health and wellness of Washington State by ensuring that there is an adequate nursing workforce to meet the current and the future healthcare needs of our population. She can be reached at 206-787-1200.

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