



N.J. Nurse Ranks Need Shot in Arm

STATE'S NUMBERS WORRISOME: More than 40 percent of nurses in N.J. are over 50; fewer than 6 percent are under 30. Many are aging; fewer learning.

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Several years ago, a 25-year-old man from Nigeria was seriously injured in New Jersey and brought to Jersey Shore University Medical Center in Neptune.

"He was in a coma," said JoAnn Watson, nurse manager of a patient care unit at the hospital. "He was close to death and had no family in the country. We, meaning myself and my nurses, contacted his family in Nigeria and stayed in touch with them while we also kept watch by his bedside.



"It was very sad and painful to see this happen to someone so young. We bonded with him and his family. We attended his funeral. We became his family." That, among a hundred other crucial things, is what nurses do. Watson, 63, of Neptune, has been doing these important things for 41 years and plans on doing them for three or four more. She and others like her in hospitals and nursing homes, schools

and factories, office buildings, military bases, and private residences, are the backbone of health care in the region, the state and the nation. And many, like Watson, are nearing retirement, a fact that is causing consternation among health care officials.

"We are looking at massive retirements a few years down the line," said Andrea Aughenbaugh, registered nurse and the CEO of the New Jersey State Nurses Association. "There was a surging demand for nurses in the late 1990s, and salaries started to climb. The schools, also, have been increasing their numbers. But starting around 2008, there will be a need to replace those nurses who are leaving."

Shortages foreseen

According to state figures, of New Jersey's 110,000 registered nurses, more than 40 percent are over 50, and fewer than 6 percent are under 30. At the same time, the largest segment of the population — the baby boomers — is aging. This means a decreasing number of nurses to care for an increasing number of people.

"I'm worried," said Richard Hader, senior vice president of nursing and chief nursing officer for Meridian Health, which owns Jersey Shore University Medical Center, as well as Ocean Medical Center in Brick and Riverview Medical Center in Red Bank. "In the short run, we'll be OK," Hader said. "But it's the end of the decade that has me concerned." In addition to the anticipated retirements, Hader pointed out that many people entering nursing are choosing it as a second career. This is the case, he said, with about half the registered nurses coming out of the nursing programs at Brookdale Community College and Ocean County College, which are Meridian's main sources of recruitment. "Many of our newer nurses are over 30," said Nurse Watson, who mentored Hader when he was starting out. "That means they will relieve the shortage for a little while, but then they, too, will be reaching retirement."

Pay has improved

Hader speculated that many young people coming out of high school and hunting for careers are looking for "sexier, higher paying jobs" than nursing. "Many get their MBAs, then find out there aren't any jobs," he said. "But there are plenty of nursing jobs and the pay has improved." For decades, the common wisdom has been that nurses are "overworked and underpaid." But the second part of the adage, at any rate, appears to no longer hold water. Salaries for registered nurses begin in the \$47,000 to \$50,000 range, and nurses can top off around \$95,000, Hader said.

"And that's not counting shift differentials," he said.

Maris Lown, registered nurse and director of Health Sciences at Brookdale Community College in the Lincroft section of Middletown, said that every registered nurse from the Brookdale program "who looks for a nursing job finds it." "Over the past three years, we've doubled our enrollment in the program from 60 to 120," she said.

Both Brookdale and Ocean County College in Dover Township offer a two-year program for an associate's degree in applied sciences in nursing. Having completed the program, students are then eligible for the state exam to become a registered nurse. Eric Wigfall, 25, of Ocean Grove, is about to complete the Brookdale program. "I'm starting off in a good position, because I can choose between Jersey Shore and Ocean Medical, and I stand to make about \$25 an hour," Wigfall said.

James Brown, dean of Health Sciences and Human Performance at Ocean County College, said he meets with representatives of area hospitals every year and "every year they ask us to please increase the number of students in our programs," he said. Brown

echoed Brookdale's Lown in saying that every registered nurse from OCC finds work, whether in hospitals, nursing homes or elsewhere. OCC's daytime program has 90 students; its evening program, 60 students; and a Kean University program, operated through an agreement at OCC's Southern Education Center in Stafford, has about 100 students. The college is also piloting a unique one-day nursing program, which has grown from 20 students to 60 students in its two years of operation. "Students work online throughout the week and come to campus one day, on Wednesdays, for 12 to 13 hours of intensive work and study," Brown explained, noting that the program was developed by two members of his staff — nurses Leah Kelly and Joan Barrett — and funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "The program's been a great success and we hope it will prove a model for community colleges throughout the state," he said.

Brown said that, in addition to the projected shortage of registered nurses, there are not enough people holding master of science degrees in nursing — the nurses who teach future nurses. "I have four MSNs retiring and I will be hard pressed to replace them," he said.

Increasing interest

Bachelor's and master's degree programs in nursing are offered at Monmouth University in West Long Branch. Janet Mahoney, Monmouth's Associate Dean of Nursing and Health Sciences, also has a program to interest the young in health care careers. "We run Nurse Camp, a two-week summer program for eighth graders, to see if we can awaken an interest in nursing," Mahoney said. "Research shows that high school may be too late to try to change young minds."

Georgian Court University in Lakewood also offers a baccalaureate program in nursing through an agreement with Seton Hall University, and area hospitals offer various "bridge" programs to make it easier for health care workers who want to become nurses. These and other efforts are making some headway against the impending shortage, health care officials said. But everyone interviewed — from Watson, the veteran nurse, to Wigfall, the student — agreed on the main ingredient in being a nurse. "You have to have a passion to help people," Watson said. "Knowing that your work is doing some good. That's very rewarding. That keeps you going."

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