

THE GLOBAL IMPACT OF THE NURSING SHORTAGE



by Cheryl A. Peterson

The Worldwide Nursing Shortage

Much has been written about the nursing shortage in America. According to the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis' report, Projected Supply, Demand and Shortages of Registered Nurses: 2000-2020, if no action is taken, the projected

shortage of registered nurses will reach 29 percent, or 808,416 full-time registered nurse positions.¹ Nursing shortages in the United States are not a new phenomenon, nor are the recommended strategies that accompany each shortage. One common strategy to alleviate the shortage is to increase the recruitment of foreign-educated nurses.

While the American Hospital Association reported a 13% vacancy rate for registered nurses in 2001, many countries in southern Africa reported vacancy rates of 30% in 2002.² Over the next 15 years, 50 percent of the registered nurses in Canada are expected to retire, creating a shortfall of 113,000 registered nurses by 2016.³ These countries are not unique. According to the International Council of Nurses (ICN), "thirty-three countries – primarily from Oceania, Africa, Central America and the Caribbean – reported that



the outflow of nurses to more affluent countries was a serious problem, worsening the shortage that already exists."⁴

The Ghana Registered Nurses Association reported that in 2000, some 500 nurses left Ghana for higher pay in other countries. This is three times the number of nurses that left in 1999, and double the number of nurses that Ghana graduated in that same year.⁵ Reports from Europe are similar. The United Kingdom, where the government has implemented a policy

of international recruitment, reports a shortage of 22,000 registered nurses.

The exception to these reports appears to be the Pacific Rim countries of Hong Kong, Korea, China, and Taiwan. It is suspected that some countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have an adequate or surplus of nurses, but there is no data confirming this. There are some countries that educate nurses and other professionals for exportation. Implicit in this practice is an understanding that when a professional

migrates to another country to work, they will send money back to the family in the home country as a means of supporting its economy. For example, since the 1970s, the Philippines has actively exported registered nurses to other countries, and more registered nurses are educated then can be employed.⁶ However, because of the global shortage of nurses, more



developed countries are turning to the strategy of importing nursing labor as a means of easing their shortages. This has led to concern by the Philippine Nurses Association about the drain on the supply of faculty and experienced specialty nursing staff working within the Philippines who are also now being recruited to other countries. In addition to the Philippines, it is believed that India is joining the ranks of countries exporting nursing labor.⁷ India already has a long history of exporting physicians to other countries; thus a model exists to facilitate the movement of nurses.

There are many factors that contribute to the migration of nurses and other professionals.⁸ Nurses leave their home countries primarily due to low wages and poor working conditions, in addition to the impact of HIV/AIDS on health system workers, concerns about personal security in areas of conflict, and economic instability.⁹ Specific policies, particularly in developed countries like the U.S., facilitate and active recruitment on the part of the health care industry, promising better wages and improved working conditions.¹⁰ These factors will be exacerbated as the demand for nursing services increases while the supply of nurses continues to decrease globally.

American Nurses Association Policy on Migration

The American Nurses Association (ANA) has a long history of advocating for foreign-educated nurses, to ensure they are treated fairly in this country, and that the importation of nursing labor does not adversely affect working conditions for U.S. nurses. The ANA believes that migration is extremely valuable, fostering the exchange of ideas and cultural understanding that contribute to the overall growth and development of the nursing profession.

It is a well established principle within international law that individuals have a right to migrate from one country to another and that this right should be protected. The ICN – and the ANA as the U.S representative to the ICN – in its position statement, *Nurse Retention, Transfer and Migration*, also recognizes the right of individual nurses to migrate, “while acknowledging the possible adverse effect that international migration may have on health care quality” as a result of a depleted nursing workforce.¹¹ The ANA believes that in this country, we have failed to maintain a work environment that promotes safe, quality nursing and that retains experienced U.S. nurses. Therefore, the practice of changing immigration law to facilitate the use of foreign educated nurses is a short-term solution that

serves only the interests of the hospital industry, not the interests of patients or domestic or foreign educated nurses.

The issue of nurse migration is of grave concern to the international nursing community. The ICN, with member representatives from 126 countries, is the largest international nursing organization that “works to ensure quality nursing care for all, sound health policies globally, the advancement of nursing knowledge, and the presence worldwide of a respected nursing profession and a competent and satisfied nursing workforce.”¹² In 2002, the ICN published its position statement *Ethical Recruitment of Nurses*, the foundation for the ethical recruitment of nurses worldwide. These principles include:

- ❖ Effective human resources planning and development
- ❖ Credible nursing regulation
- ❖ Access to full employment
- ❖ Freedom of movement
- ❖ Freedom from discrimination
- ❖ Good faith contracting
- ❖ Equal pay for work of equal value
- ❖ Access to grievance procedures
- ❖ Safe work environment
- ❖ Effective orientation/mentoring/supervision
- ❖ Employment trial periods
- ❖ Freedom of association
- ❖ Regulation of recruitment¹³



The International Nursing Community

While this article has focused on the worldwide nursing shortage and concerns related to nurse migration, it is critical to understand that the international nursing community is growing in strength and sophistication. Through the ICN and other international health organizations, nurses are overcoming boundaries to solve problems and strengthen the global profession of nursing with the ultimate vision of access by all citizens to quality nursing services. In addition, we are working together to create a world where the nursing workforce is valued and respected, provided with a safe work environment, and paid at a level commensurate with our experience. ■

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www.nursingworld.org

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www.who.int/health-services-delivery/nursing/

International Labor Organization
www.ilo.org/public/english/index.htm

International nurse mobility: Trends and policy implications
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