



Nursing Comes of Age

There was a time, not so long ago, when nursing was one of a few options offered to women wishing to pursue a career. Indeed, some young women entered the field not necessarily to engage in a lifelong profession, but to earn a living until they could find a husband and return to the more customary role of wife and mother. Nursing is now considered a profession that is one of the most exciting and challenging careers available to men and women today. The variety of roles for nurses allows them to apply their ingenuity to their work and beyond.

But the nursing workforce is aging rapidly. The average nurse will be over forty-five years old by 2010 (Buerhaus, Douglas, and Auerbach, 2000). America's hospitals increasingly rely on the older nurses who have the experience and know-how of years on the job, yet who also run a higher risk of back injuries, and are on the cusp of retirement. As Dr. Peter Buerhaus notes in a sidebar next to Boomer-turned-student Joe Campbell's article, Baby Boomers represent the "critical bottleneck" in the nursing shortage. Their retirement and increasing health care needs will not only tax the health care system, but increase the demand for registered nurses. Hospitals must take a look at how to improve the work environment to better protect older nurses from back and

other on-the-job injuries. Shorter shifts, flexible scheduling, and promotions without giving up patient contact are part of the incentives that some hospitals are now implementing to retain older nurses.

It is also true that older nurses are a valuable asset to new nurses. We rely on them for their experience and calm. Nurses who have been in the field for some time can mentor new nurses by passing on the expertise that they bring to patient care, and can share information about the resources available to new nurses. As Dr. Lynn Wiecek points out in "What Brandon Can Teach Nurses About Leadership," young and older nurses can both learn "new tricks" from each other - it's all about implementing what you learned in pre-kindergarten and taking it to a new level.

Many nursing students, myself included, would like to thank the "older nurses" for their knowledge, patience, and understanding while mentoring us.

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references

Buerhaus, P., Skiger, Douglas O., & Auerbach, David I. (2000). Implications of an Aging Registered Nurse Workforce. *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 283, 2948-2954.