



Your Bright Future in Geriatric Nursing

by Amy Berman and Deirdre Thornlow



health care scene as the fastest growing age group in the United States. In 2002, more than 35 million Americans, (1 in 8) were over the age of 65. By 2030, the numbers will double, to about 70 million Americans 65 or older, or 1 out of every 5 (AOA, 2004). Imagine how the need for geriatric nurses will increase. Even the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN), the organization responsible for developing the NCLEX-RN® licensing exam, confirms that it is critical for all newly licensed nurses to have the specialized knowledge and skills to care for older adults (Wendt, 2003). According to Wendt, newly licensed nurses report that older patients currently make up 62.5% of their patients.

Clearly, there are not enough nurses prepared with the specialized education and skills in geriatric nursing to meet even today's demand. There are currently over 157,200 registered nurses who have completed a master's level program to become certified nurse specialists (CNS), nurse practitioners (NPs), or both. However, only three percent of all advanced practice nurses (CNS and NP) are certified in geriatric nursing (American Nurses Credentialing Center, 2002). To add insult to injury, there is also a critical shortage of geriatric nursing faculty today, with one quarter of nursing programs in this country lacking a gerontological faculty member.

If you are like most nursing students, the average age of your patients is 65 and older. In fact, this population is the largest group of people seeking care in every type of health care setting. Older adults make up 46% of all hospital days, 80% of homecare visits, and represent 90% of long-term care residents (NCHS, 2004). Older adults are exploding on the



The opportunities for making a difference in geriatric nursing are endless. Geriatric nursing is a relatively new field, where applying creativity and knowledge makes a real difference in the quality of care for your patients. There are no limits to what you can do in geriatric nursing, from working in assisted living communities, to rehabilitation centers, long-term care facilities, and hospitals and outpatient clinics. As the number of older adults continues to rise, geriatric nursing opportunities will grow in leaps and bounds to meet the specialized health care needs of this population.

Will you be prepared to provide the best care for your older patients? Will you have the knowledge and skills to be a leader in your health care institution? To become confident in your ability to care for geriatric patients, you will need specialized knowledge, including understanding normal aging and being familiar with the different ways an older patient may present with subtle clinical changes. You will also need to watch for medication interactions and adverse effects that are particularly relevant with the older population. In short, you will need to know best nursing practices in care for older adults.

Models of care have been developed to promote healthy outcomes for geriatric patients, such as Nurses

Improving Care for Healthsystem Elders (NICHE), the Acute Care for the Elderly (ACE) unit, and the Geriatric Resource Nurse (GRN), which are being implemented in health care organizations nationwide. Ask about these models during your next clinical rotation. Are any of the sites using these geriatric care delivery models?

The older adult has complex health care needs, so as a geriatric nurse you can apply your knowledge and skills in a broad range of traditional and nontraditional settings. You can become a geriatric resource nurse (GRN), using your expertise to provide direct patient care and to guide other staff nurses. Or, you can become a staff development educator, a discharge planner, or a case manager. After graduation, when you have gained enough clinical hours to become eligible, you can sit for certification as a gerontological nurse, which expands your professional opportunities. Many institutions offer a pay differential for gerontological certification (up to \$6000 additional at some health care institutions). The American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) offers a gerontological certification exam for entry-level RNs and a separate gerontological certification exam for advanced practice nurses. To prepare for the ANCC Gerontological Certification Exam, the John A. Hartford Foundation Institute for

Geriatric Nursing offers a free online course (See Resources).

By continuing on for your master's degree, you can become either a geriatric clinical nurse specialist (GCNS) or a geriatric nurse practitioner (GNP), or both. Geriatric clinical nurse specialists provide leadership and supervision, usually in the hospital setting, in direct patient care and/or in educating staff and patients. Geriatric nurse practitioners diagnose and manage common and chronic illnesses either independently or as part of a health care delivery team in a variety of institutional and community settings. Armed with your advanced practice degree, you can practice in traditional CNS and NP roles, become a manager of an adult day care program, a director of nursing in long-term care or other health care organization. The possibilities are endless.

By continuing on for a doctoral degree, you can join the ranks of nurse faculty, or become a nurse researcher and conduct cutting-edge research in fields such as Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, or heart disease. Due to the demand for doctorally prepared geriatric nurses, the American Academy of Nursing (AAN) offers pre- and post-doctoral scholarships. (See Resources)

If you are contemplating a nursing specialty other than geriatric nursing, remember that the majority of patients in most nursing specialties are over 65, so you will need geriatric nursing knowledge in almost every specialty. For example, if you choose a career in oncology, consider that 63% of cancer patients are older adults. And if you are thinking of choosing a career in emergency nursing, you should know that older adults make up 60% of visits to cardiologists and 53% of visits to urologists. If you seek a career working on a high-tech intensive care unit (ICU), 56% of your patients will be older



adults (Hutchins, 1999; O'Neill & Barry, 2003). Even pediatric nurses are using their geriatric nursing knowledge to assess grandparents, the primary caregivers to an increasing number of children.

If you plan to seek certification in an area other than geriatric nursing, consider dual certification; for example, you can become an emergency nurse and a geriatric nurse. (See Resources for more information.)

You can make a difference in geriatric nursing! As the number of older Americans continues to increase over the years, there will be a critical need for your specialized knowledge in the care of older adults. You can be a resource and leader for your fellow nurses. Your geriatric expertise, knowledge and skills will be needed in most every specialty and health care setting. The time is right for you to become expert in geriatric nursing. ☺



Amy Berman, BS, BSnc, (amy.berman@nyu.edu) is nursing education initiatives director for the John A. Hartford Foundation Institute for Geriatric Nursing in New York, NY, and is a baccalaureate nursing student at New York University. She has 20 years' experience as a health care administrator.



Deirdre Thornlow, MN, RN, (dthornlo@aacn.nche.edu) is the gerontology program director at the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, and is in a doctoral nursing program at the University of Virginia.

references

Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Statistics. (Online), Retrieved 6/21/04. <http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/prof/Statistics/statistics.asp>

American Association of Colleges of Nursing, The John A. Hartford Foundation Institute for Geriatric Nursing. (2000). *Older adults: Recommended core competencies and curricular guidelines for geriatric nursing care*, Washington, D.C.: American Association of Colleges of Nursing.

American Nurses Credentialing Center (2002). Annual Report.

Hall, M.J., DeFrances, C.J. (2003). 2001 *National Hospital Discharge Survey. Advance data from vital and health statistics*; no. 332. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/ad/331-340/331-340.htm

Hutchins, L.F. (1999). Underrepresentation of patients 65 years of age or older in cancer treatment trials. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Volume 241:2061-2097, Number 27.

National Center for Health Statistics. (2004). *Home health care patients: Data from the 2000 National Home and Hospice Care Survey*, www.cdc.gov/nchs/releases/04facts/patients.htm

O'Neill G, Barry P. (2003). Public training physicians in geriatric care: Responding to critical need. *Policy and Aging Report*,

Volume 13, Number 2.

Wendt, A. (2003). Mapping gerontological nursing competencies to the 2001 NCLEX-RN test plan. *Nursing Outlook*, 51(4), 152-157.

resources

www.hartfordign.org

"Try This Assessment" Series
Assessment tools you can use with the older adult patient such as the mini-mental status examination, falls assessment, and pain assessment developed by the Hartford Institute. Also, the "Try This Dementia" series developed in collaboration with the Alzheimer's Association includes tools such as assessing pain in persons with dementia.

www.nyu.edu/education/nursing/hartford.institute/course/home.html

Gerontological Nursing Certification Free Online Review Course
The Gerontological Nursing Certification Review course examines the fundamental knowledge about care of the older adult that the registered nurse must master to be certified as a Gerontological Nurse by the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC).

www.GeroNurseOnline.com

GeroNurseOnline
Comprehensive website offers geriatric nursing topics, tools, and resources to assist nurses in recognizing and caring for common clinical changes in the older adult, information on certification, and more, presented by Nurse Competence in Aging.

www.hartfordign.org

Geriatric Nursing Hospital Competencies
Competencies for all nurses who care for older adults developed by the John A. Hartford Foundation Institute for Geriatric Nursing.

www.aacn.nche.edu/Education/gercomp.htm

Core Competencies
The American Association of Colleges of Nursing has developed curricular core competencies in care for older adults. Is your school using these guidelines to prepare you? Check out the guidelines to see if you are acquiring the skills necessary to care for older adults.

www.aannet.org

The American Academy of Nursing
Building Academic Geriatric Nursing Capacity (BAGNC) Program funds and supports nurse scholars including predoctoral, postdoctoral and MBA scholars.

www.nursingworld.org/ancc

American Nurses Credentialing Center
Information and resources on Gerontological Nursing Certification examination.

www.HGNI.org

Hartford Geriatric Nursing Initiative
The Hartford Geriatric Nursing Initiative (HGNI) represents a \$38.4 million investment from The John A. Hartford Foundation to prepare professional nurses to play leadership roles in improving the health of older adults.

Photo credits: author photos by Sandy Jung and Keither Weller. Editorial photos supplied by The John A. Hartford Foundation Institute for Geriatric Nursing, New York University, Steinhardt School of Education, Division of Nursing. Photography by James Schuck. Reprinted with permission.