The Nursing Shortage and the Aging Boom: The Need for More Nurses to Care for an Aging Population

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People in the United States are living longer and have more complex medical diagnoses, multiple comorbidities, and chronic conditions. This creates a growing challenge in providing care for older individuals. The average life expectancy for adults in the United States was 77.5 years in 2022, an increase from 76.4 years just one year earlier (Kochanek et al., 2024). As the population ages, the question of whether there will be enough nurses to care for them begs an answer. Complicating the care question even more is that the registered nurse workforce is also aging, with over a quarter nearing retirement within the next five years (Haddad et al., 2024). This impending wave of retirements threatens to exacerbate the already critical shortage of nurses, potentially leading to significant gaps in patient care and increased workloads for the remaining staff. This demographic shift in the workforce is not occurring in isolation; it coincides with a growing demand for health care services driven by the aging population and the increasing prevalence of chronic diseases (Stimpfel & Dickson, 2019).

The convergence of these issues highlights an urgent need for effective workforce planning and development strategies to ensure the sustainability of high-quality health care delivery. The landscape for newly graduated registered nurses is evolving; professional commitment, career self-efficacy, and anxiety levels significantly impact turnover (Zhang et al., 2024). As health

Americans are living longer, presenting with complex medical diagnoses, multiple comorbidities, and chronic conditions. As the population ages, the question of whether there will be enough nurses to care for them begs an answer. This study examines the career aspirations of new graduate nurses using data from the NSNA New Graduate Survey for the 2021−2022 and 2022−2023 academic years. While most graduates sought positions in acute care, interest in specialties focused on aging, chronic care, and community health remained minimal. Inspiring interest in these areas requires innovative educational strategies, including gerontology-focused curricula, simulation-based learning, community outreach, and clinical placements in elder care. Mentorship, workforce incentives, and highlighting career growth opportunities are essential for recruiting nurses into these fields. A collaborative effort between academia and healthcare institutions is crucial to addressing the growing demand for nurses with expertise in managing aging and chronically ill populations. Sustained efforts will enhance the nursing workforce's preparedness, ensuring the quality and safety of patient care while fostering meaningful and rewarding careers.

Keywords: Aging population, nursing workforce, gerontology, chronic care.

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care undergoes continuous transformation, academia, and service industries are urged to train nurses with expertise in caring for an aging population (Fang et al., 2024).

The National Student Nurses Association's Annual Survey of New Graduate Nurses

The objective of the present article was to investigate new nurses' career aspirations by examining the responses to the National Student Nurses Association's Annual Survey of New Graduate Nurses. Responses representing new nurses' current and future career aspirations were extracted from two annual surveys of members who graduated during the 2021–2022 ($n = 2,824$) and 2022–2023 ($n = 2,120$) academic years. By exploring the career aspirations of a national sample of new graduate nurses, this inquiry sought to inform education and workforce planning, ensuring that the nursing profession adequately meets future health care demands.

Most graduates from 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 academic years, respectively, graduated from baccalaureate degree programs (traditional pre-licensure) (44%, 43%), followed by associate degree programs (30%, 31%) and accelerated baccalaureate degree programs (21%, 19%). Smaller percentages of respondents graduated from direct-entry master's pre-licensure programs (2%, 4%), hospital-based diploma programs (2% for both academic years), and clinical nurse leader master's direct-entry pre-licensure programs (< 1% for both academic years). Most passed the NCLEX (91%, 96%) and found employment (87%, 90%) within one year of graduation. The following were the top three areas where new graduates of 2021–2022 and 2022–2023, respectively, began work: medical-surgical units (15%, 13%), emergency departments (13%, 14%), and intensive care units (11%, 12%).

As for future career aspirations, nearly one-quarter of the graduates for both academic years (24%, 22%) selected Advanced Practice Nurse or Nurse Practitioner as the practice of most interest. This was followed by working in maternity labor/delivery nursing and becoming a Nurse Anesthetist, each at 8% for the 2021–2022 graduates and 7% for the 2022–2023 graduates. Becoming a Nurse Educator trailed close behind as a future career interest for 5% of the 2021–2022 graduates, increasing to 7% of the 2022–2023 graduates. Conversely, interest in travel nursing decreased from 5% for the 2021–2022 graduates to 3% for the 2022–2023 graduates.

Very few respondents (less than 1%) from both academic years selected practice areas focused on chronic conditions (dialysis, long-term care, rehabilitation, veterans' administration), aging (gerontology), or community-related (home care/community health) practices as a current or future interest.

Inspiration to Become a Nurse

Despite very few new nurses selecting practice areas that specifically focused on caring for the aging, new graduates offered reflections in open-ended responses that having and caring for an aging family member had inspired them to enter nursing. One new graduate was inspired by the care she provided to a parent: "I have always had a passion to help people…My mother had a life-debilitating disease, and I have been caring for her since I was a child. She always called me her little nurse." Others found inspiration in caring for ailing grandparents: "I always wanted to become a nurse to take care of my great-grandpa when I became old enough to realize he was sick." This new nurse reflected on the happiness nursing care brought to her grandmother.

I watched my grandmother go through multiple long-term illnesses growing up. I saw her go in and out of hospitals, short-term care, and long-term care facilities. Eventually, toward the end of her life, I saw the impact of home nursing and how it truly lifted her spirits. She would look forward to when the nurses came, and they took such wonderful care of her until the end.

The most often selected inspirations to become a nurse among graduates from both academic years, respectively, were wanting a career to help people (41%, 54%), always wanting to be a nurse (29%, 53%), and having a personal or family experience using the health care system (27%, 32%).

Implications for Education and Practice

There is a growing demand for nurses in chronic care, gerontology, and community health due to an aging population and an increase in chronic conditions (McManus et al., 2017). This demand creates opportunities for academic institutions and the service industry to be creative, highlight the positive aspects of these fields, and get students and new nurses excited about caring for these populations. Experiences in academia and practice can stimulate nursing students' interest in chronic conditions, aging, and community-related health care.

Schools of nursing may use several strategies to include gerontology in their curricula. Developing a gerontology minor or advanced practice specialization in gerontology may entice some students. Encouraging participation in community outreach, health fairs, and similar events for the aging can enhance students' understanding of the needs of this population and the impact of these programs, potentially leading to increased interest. Comprehensive learning modules catering explicitly to chronic diseases, gerontology, and community health can add more depth to this particular interest area, offering case studies, evidence-based practices, and the latest research (Dahlke et al., 2021). Real-life simulation scenarios focused on chronic care, gerontology, and community health enhance learning and confidence in caring for these populations (Curry-Lourenco et al., 2022). Another strategy for increasing student interest, suggested by De Coninck and colleagues (2021), is to invite outside experts to guest lecture, providing their perspectives on chronic conditions, gerontology, and community health.

Clinical placements for prelicensure nursing students are primarily in acute-care hospitals. Intentionally selecting patients from the older adult age group or offering clinical rotations in areas focused on elder care and chronic diseases (such as long-term care facilities, rehabilitation centers, home health agencies, and veterans' administration hospitals) presents actual hands-on exposure. These experiences increase competence in caring for older adult patients with multiple comorbidities and chronic conditions associated with aging (Goers et al., 2022). For example, Lutheran Services and the University of the Sunshine Coast have instituted student placement programs to help fill the workforce gap. Complemented by an eight-week clinical learning rotation, the experience provides students with practical skills and a better understanding of the complexities of caring for an aging population (Alspach et al., 2023). Programs such as these can help them retain this knowledge following graduation.

Another approach to implementing

geriatric competencies into nursing prelicensure programs is using the Institute for Healthcare Improvement 4M Framework. The practical application of this framework showed improvement in students' competencies for assessment and person-centered care with geriatric populations in community settings (Mate et al., 2021). Some prelicensure programs have incorporated the Advanced Primary Care of the Elderly program to ensure proficiency in managing geriatric syndromes, screening, and counseling. Using the training module ModSPICES in the clinical environment helped students improve their critical thinking and clinical judgment when working with the gerontology population (Lekan & Yasin, 2022).

New graduate nurses may face a steep learning curve and feel unprepared for the challenges specific to chronic care, gerontology, and community health due to insufficient exposure during their education. Offering incentives for continuing education and specialization in these fields can motivate nurses to pursue these paths (Asber, 2019). These specialties' demanding nature, high patient loads, and emotional stress can lead to burnout and job dissatisfaction. Providing a positive and nurturing work culture is crucial. Appropriate staffing levels, reasonable caseloads, and training opportunities can significantly impact the recruitment of nurses in these areas (Bae, 2023). There may be a lack of awareness or negative perceptions about these fields' career opportunities and growth potential. Highlighting career diversity through workshops and seminars will keep nurses abreast of growing opportunities in the field (Woodward & Willgerodt, 2022). Structured mentoring programs with experienced nurses as role models could provide guidance and support and inspire new nurses to enter these specialties (Hoover et al., 2020). A mentor gives new nurses someone to emulate and a confidant who may provide insights into the nuanced care needed in these specialties. Hospitals can use their infrastructure to provide in-person instruction and real-world experience at dialysis centers, long-term care facilities, rehabilitation centers, and veterans' administration hospitals (Empleo-Frazier et al., 2022). Implementing telehealth programs may attract a younger generation of graduates who are digital natives and are thus adept with technology (Nittas et al., 2023). Participating in hospital community outreach programs can further nurses' practice skills and help them see how the nursing profession fits into the bigger picture of health care advocacy (Vukov et al., 2017). These and similar experiences are necessary to improve new graduate nurses' skills and cultivate interest in these populations.

Conclusion

Providing for the nuanced needs of aging and chronically ill populations demands a multifaceted strategy. Academia and service must come together to facilitate the entry of new graduates into careers caring for the aging population with chronic diseases. Educational institutions are urged to increase competencies related to chronic disease management (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2021), and health care organizations are encouraged to create structured training programs in advanced geriatrics and chronic disease management to grow the workforce. A robust pipeline of qualified nurses remains critical to meet the future health care workforce's demands while preserving the quality and safety of patient care. Educating and guiding the nursing workforce leads to an environment where future health care needs can be met with more skill, compassion, and care.

Authors' Reflections

A career in caring for the aging can be viewed as an intergenerational exchange and be deeply rewarding on many levels. The preceding generations bring years of wisdom, life stories, and cultural knowledge to share. Such an exchange contributes to one's emotional and psychological well-being, building a relationship between people that transcends ordinary caregiver–patient roles. These experiences contribute to the emotional strength, empathy, and nuanced understanding of aging and death that younger generations of nurses will need to sustain their desire to work as nurses without facing burnout. Not only does taking care of the aging mean helping in society, but it also makes it possible for an entire generation to continue contributing to life and leaving a legacy. This holistic approach to nursing turns a job into an occupation that can bring "nourishment of the soul" and satisfaction through purpose. **DN**

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