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The Future of Nursing

Nurses are in high demand across the country - and that demand will only increase in the years ahead.

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Despite the ups and downs of the U.S. economy, there is at least one bright spot when it comes to employment: nurses are in high demand throughout the country, and that demand will only increase over the next several years. By the end of this decade, labor experts anticipate that [employment of registered nurses](#) will grow by 26 percent - faster than the average for all other occupations. That means at least half a million additional nurses will be needed to cope with the health needs of an aging population. The roles and responsibilities of those nurses will also have to expand to keep up with demand.

A More Prominent Role

Nurses are playing an increasingly important role in our health care system as it transitions from a treatment-oriented mindset to a focus on prevention and wellness. According to [The Future of Nursing](#), a comprehensive 2010 report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM), nurses have new opportunities to become leaders, help craft health policy, enact real systems improvement, conduct research and refine evidence-based practice guidelines. They will increasingly be key players in interdisciplinary teams of health providers who deliver optimal patient care in a variety of settings. The IOM committee concluded that "nurses can and should play a fundamental role" in the transformation of our health care system.

The IOM's report recommends that policymakers revamp current nursing practice guidelines, which vary from state to state, sometimes arbitrarily. This would allow nurses to practice to the full extent of their education and training, ensuring that the half-million [Advanced Practice Registered Nurses \(APRN\)](#) in the U.S. - nurses with advanced educational degrees and certification - will be able to provide highly specialized patient care without encountering as many bureaucratic roadblocks.

Evolving Career Opportunities

Most nurses will require advanced education and training to meet increasingly complex health care needs. The IOM recommended that nurses receive ongoing opportunities to obtain advanced degrees and to participate in lifelong learning. Our diverse patient population will benefit from an equally diverse nursing workforce, and the IOM stressed that recruitment efforts should take both race/ethnicity and gender into account.

A culture that values and encourages leadership from a variety of sources will be necessary for successful health care reform. Nurses have many opportunities to become leaders - including assessing and implementing quality and system improvements, leading teams of health providers, and forming and implementing health policy. Nurses are poised to take advantage of IOM recommendations for additional educational programs, competency training, and continuous professional growth.

The three million registered, licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses (R.N.s, L.P.N.s, L.V.N.s) already comprise the largest segment of the healthcare workforce. Nurses' professional choices may be among the most diverse of all health occupations, as they work in institutional, private, government, and non-traditional settings. There are opportunities to work just about anywhere in the U.S., or to travel and work abroad. Chances to specialize in additional practice areas will also increase, as an ever-evolving health system creates additional possibilities.

Nurses are taking on additional levels of responsibilities, gaining new skills and competencies, using increasingly sophisticated health technologies, and actively partnering with other health providers to deliver patient-centered, evidence-based care. As *The Future of Nursing* concludes, nurses will continue to shine as they expand their roles, and will be needed and relied on more than ever.

LIZ SEEGER

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