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Nursing: Not Just for Women Anymore

Nursing wasn't always female-dominated, and more and more men are entering the field.

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Although many people still think of nursing as a "woman's occupation," a growing number of men are finding it to be an ideal career choice.

Men have actually been providing nursing care for many centuries. Monks, priests, and other religious healers were frequently the only ones in their communities with any health care knowledge. It was not until Florence Nightingale gained prominence during the Crimean War that women really became associated with nursing. The profession slowly evolved during the early 20th century and eventually became predominantly female. Although men continued to perform similar duties in the military, they were classified as orderlies, and earned about half of what female nurses were paid.

In today's labor market, men make up less than six percent of the nearly three million registered nurses in the United States. That is changing rapidly, however, as more and more men enter the field, drawn to its regular schedules, competitive salaries, varied skill set and multiple paths for professional growth. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing recently reported that more than 11 percent of 2010-2011 undergraduate nursing students were men.

Nursing is becoming a more popular choice for both younger males entering college and experienced men looking to change careers.

"I was very drawn to nursing when I decided to make a career move," said Steve Hetzel, R.N., of Floral Park, N.Y. He was looking for new challenges after 30 years in the graphic design field. "The nurses who cared for my father and the other patients at his nursing home really inspired me, and I returned to school to earn my BSN."

Steve worked as a part-time aide at St. Francis Hospital in Roslyn, N.Y. while in school, and was hired as a full time nurse after graduation. "There was a real team-oriented attitude," he said. "I knew from the first day I started there that this is what I wanted to do." Steve began as a critical care nurse and recently moved to O.R. Recovery, where each day presents new challenges and opportunities to use his skills, training, and experience.

A groundbreaking 2011 report from The Institute of Medicine (IOM), *The Future of Nursing*, says men play an important role in a diversified nursing workforce, and offer unique perspectives on care giving. Additionally, the IOM report noted that some male patients are more comfortable with a male nurse, and may be willing to discuss certain topics like sexual health with them more readily than with a female R.N.



"There haven't been any issues with patients of either gender," Steve said, "although sometimes being an older male nurse is an advantage when relating to certain family members."



While some male nurses may still encounter social stigma, that is changing as more join the professional ranks and patients and physicians grow accustomed to seeing a man in nurse's scrubs. Steve said he and other male nurses are very accepted by his hospital's staff. "I'm not thought of as a male nurse," he said. "I'm just a nurse."

His advice to men considering nursing: "We could really use you. It's a great and rewarding career."

LIZ SEEGERT
Liz Seegert is an experienced health journalist/freelance writer, focusing on social and human welfare. Issue and policy concerns range from women's health to health literacy to e-health.

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