

FORWARD

Policy Forum: *The North Carolina Nursing Workforce*

Recently, a family member was in a local hospital for an extended period. The experience reminded me once again that, in the midst of all of the wonderful miracles and technology at our disposal in today's modern hospitals, nurses are still of critical importance in the process of caring for patients. My family's inevitable questions (What is happening? What should we expect? Where is something located? What hours is a service available?) were all directed to the nurse of the hour. And the nurse invariably could calm the anxious patient and the family with professionalism and expertise. Such is the expectation that our society places on the nursing profession.

Yet, those of us who work in healthcare recognize the challenges that are before the profession today. These challenges are enumerated in detail in the report of the Task Force on the NC Nursing Workforce, summarized in this issue of the *North Carolina Medical Journal*. This important and timely report includes some suggestions and recommendations for improvements and modifications in the way nurses are recruited to the profession, trained, and practice in North Carolina. Some of the subjects discussed have been with us for decades; others are ever-changing and call for new and clear thinking about the possibilities for the future.

The Duke Endowment, as one foundation, has long supported projects to address some of these challenges. However, at a meeting of our Board of Trustees in May 2002, there was a lively conversation about how we might best support a statewide discussion of the issues that could lead to a consensus for new actions. The North Carolina Institute of Medicine gave wonderful leadership by developing the format of such a process, and provided the all-important neutral voice in the discussions needed to arrive at the printed recommendations that appear in this report. The members of the Task Force were indispensable. They came to the meetings with enthusiasm, interest, and high ideals for the future of nursing in North Carolina. The final product would not have been nearly as valuable without their participation and contributions.

We believe the groundwork for the future is being laid by this report. Already, work has begun to assist foundations like the Endowment as we strive to understand where we can maximize our investments to address nursing workforce issues. We encourage your thoughtful consideration of the information and recommendations contained in these pages. And we encourage lively and constructive discussions of the actions that will lead North Carolina toward a more healthy future.

In hospitals, in nursing facilities, in home visitation, in public health, in school health centers, in rural health centers, in nursing education classrooms, and in many other locations, nursing is vital to the care that we all wish to receive—for ourselves and for our communities. It is our collective responsibility to do what we can to ensure that we have an excellent nursing workforce in 2004, and for many years to come.

Please join with us in moving these dreams to reality.

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