

## Why is Nursing Important?

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As defined by the American Nurses Association, nursing is the protection, promotion and optimization of health and abilities, the prevention of illness and injury, and the alleviation of suffering.<sup>1</sup> Nursing has its historical roots in the poorhouses, the battlefields, and the industrial revolutions in Europe and America. Nurses cared for the sick in their homes, the wounded on battlefields and the suffering in institutions. While tending to the needs of their patients, nurses also observed their patients' progress or lack thereof, and the environments that either promoted or impeded their recovery.

This is not work that can be "outsourced." This is not work that can be "moved overseas." This is not work that can be performed by robots. Rather, this is hands-on, human-to-human, intimate work that all persons will need at some point in their lives. It is work that is intellectually challenging, physically demanding and spiritually enriching. Nurses bear witness to birth, death, and the many joys and sufferings in between. Nurses are not only providers of direct care, but are also designers, managers and coordinators of care.

As Virginia Henderson said in an excerpt from *Principles and Practice of Nursing (6th edition)*,<sup>2</sup> "Nursing is helping people in the performance of those activities that they would perform unaided if they had the necessary strength, will or knowledge." Thus, nurses are helping people at their most vulnerable,

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dependent times—when they need help the most. At every working moment, nurses are responsible for the lives of the patients in their charge and the peace of mind of their anxious visitors. While providing this complex care, nurses are also advocates and educators of these patients and their families.

To succeed in all of these roles, professional nurses have

been taught a set of core values which they continue to embrace: altruism, respect for human dignity, integrity, and social justice. Nurses have been the eyes, ears, hands and minds of those in need for over 100 years. About 2.7 million registered nurses in the United States (75,000 in North Carolina) go to work each day and accomplish just that. And according to repeated Gallop polls, people have come to know, respect, expect and trust that nurses will continue to do so.

### Why the Task Force Report on the NC Nursing Workforce Is Important

The provision of nursing services is in crisis—both nationally and in North Carolina. The demand for more nurses is increasing faster than the supply, and those in the profession are nearing retirement at a faster pace than they are being replaced. The institutional work environment is not always supportive to the work the nurse is trying to accomplish, making retention of nurses at the bedside a critical problem.

North Carolina has a rich history of taking a leadership role in providing nurses and expert nursing care. In 1903, North Carolina was the first state to establish a Nursing Practice Act that created a Board of Nursing to safeguard the health of the public and provided for the legal registration of women (initially as nurses based on their education and practice experience.

This hallmark event occurred over 100 years ago, but the tradition of "firsts" continued. In 1989, at the recommendation of the General Assembly's Task Force on the

Nursing Shortage, the legislature established and funded the first Nursing Scholars Program in the country. Nursing students were given the opportunity to participate in a scholarship/loan program leading not only to initial licensure but to advanced education in this increasingly demanding field. Two years later, the General Assembly passed legislation that created and funded the North

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Carolina Center for Nursing to monitor supply, demand and utilization of nurses. Another Task Force initiative was to provide funding to the NC Area Health Education Centers (AHEC) Program for recruitment and educational mobility initiatives and grants to institutions to stimulate improvement in nurses' work environments. All of these approaches helped keep North Carolina from experiencing the effects of nursing shortages... until now. After twelve years, it is time to act again.

For the last 14 months, the Task Force established by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine has brought together the best minds in North Carolina.

These minds have carefully crafted a 21st Century plan to provide our citizens with the continued high quality nursing services they deserve. The solutions to a potentially devastating nursing shortage are in this report. Hence, it is critical that the



recommendations in the report come to fruition. The time for study is over. The time for debate has closed. The time for action is at hand if the health and well being of our citizens is to be protected. **NCMJ**

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## REFERENCES

- 1 *Nursing's Social Policy Statement (2nd ed.)*. 2003. Washington, DC: American Nurses Association.
- 2 Henderson, V. Nite, G. *Principles and Practice of Nursing (6th ed.)*. 1997. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, Inc.
- 3 *Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice*. 2004. Washington, D.C.: American Nurses Association.