WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR HEALTHCARE DELIVERY?

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EMERGING NURSE LEADERS

By G. Adriana Perez

For current students in nursing, it is a historic time in the United States (U.S.) to shape the future health care system, in the areas of clinical practice, education, and health policy. While the majority of clinical hours in nursing school might be spent in the hospital, a growing number of new graduate nursing positions are opening in ambulatory, primary care, home and community health settings. The passing of landmark legislation through the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (Public Law 111-148) (ACA), has created opportunities to focus on health and wellness, and to test new models of healthcare and education that consider the health of the individual, their family and community, which Koh (2010) describes as “inseparable” from each other.

Current Forces Changing our Health Care System

There are several forces that are changing our healthcare system; this articles focuses on several of the major ones. First, the changing demographics of the U.S. population highlight the need for a targeted, strategic focus on better addressing the health needs of the older adult population and the growing ethnic minority population. Through 2050, the U.S. will experience a considerable growth in the older adult population. Every day 10,000 baby boomers (those born from 1946-1964) turn 65 and this trend is expected to continue to 2030 (U.S. Census 2000). In addition, the increase in the number of the “oldest old” will be even more dramatic, as those 85 and older are projected to more than triple from 5.9 million to 18.2 million, reaching 4.3 percent of the total U.S. population. Regardless of clinical specialty, it is critical that nurses consider training and education in gerontology. Whether new graduate nurses work in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), emergency department, or home health, the majority of patients in those settings are 65 and older. Further, there is a growing trend of grandparents caring for grandchildren, therefore, even in pediatrics, nurses must learn about the needs of older adults.

Second, the rate of uninsured individuals and families in the U.S. is the lowest in history. Approximately 16.4 million Americans have now gained access to health insurance coverage since the passage of the ACA in 2010, through the Health Insurance Marketplace, due to young adults remaining on their parents’ health plans until they turn 26, and through state Medicaid expansion (www.hhs.gov/healthcare). Results from the recent Commonwealth Fund Biennial Health Insurance Survey (2014) indicate that the ACA’s subsidized insurance options and consumer protections reduced the number of uninsured working-age adults from an estimated 37 million people, or 20 percent of the population, in 2010 to 29 million, or 16 percent, by the second half of 2014. This is important to nurses because having access to healthcare can decrease the number of individuals and families that are delaying treatment, which often leads to complications related to chronic diseases, such as diabetes and hypertension. And yet, while access to care helps to address one barrier to achieving health equity, much work will remain for nurses who are often at the frontline providing healthcare and education. Nurses are uniquely qualified to guide the newly insured through the healthcare system as the most trusted professional in the U.S. for the past 12 years (www.gallup.com/tag/ethics.aspx). Therefore, future nurses and students have an opportunity to sharpen their own knowledge and skills on the basics of health insurance literacy.

Third, issues related to community-based care and the focus of the National Prevention Strategy, as part of the ACA, emphasize new payment approaches that stress care coordination, and federal financial incentives that will drive the interest and demand for health information exchange, as well as community engagement efforts to promote health across communities. The Office of the National Coordinator (ONC) for Health Information Technology recently published A Vision for the Future, describing the progress made through health policy and programmatic action, where the majority of “meaningful use” eligible hospitals and health care professionals have adopted and embedded IT in their every day practice. The ONC suggests that by 2024, a “learning health system” that includes patients, health care providers, communities and researchers should have access to a vast array of inter-operable health IT products and resources that will enhance their potential to achieve...
improved health goals. This is an exciting area where emerging millennial nurse leaders will thrive, due to a higher exposure to technology compared to previous nursing generations. Such technology-savvy nurse leaders may propel the success of IT processes for improving the retention of health care information that may lead to therapeutic health outcomes, through standardize health records, better data collection and improved industry transparency.

In addition, the National Prevention Strategy will continue to shape health care delivery through priority recommendations that focus on saving lives and improving health across generations, across gender, and across all communities throughout the U.S. (http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/priorities/prevention/strategy/). The overarching goal of the National Prevention Strategy is to increase the number of Americans who are healthy at every stage of life. Nurses, and in particular Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs), are well equipped and needed to ultimately achieve this vision, as public health leaders and equal partners in interprofessional practice. With the support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and AARP, the Future of Nursing: Campaign for Action is strongly positioned to make a significant impact in ensuring APRNs are able to practice to the full extent of their education and training, as recommended by the Institute of Medicine’s landmark report (2011). As more families gain health insurance coverage, APRNs can also help address the shortage of primary care providers needed to focus on preventive care and wellness in the changing health care landscape.

A More Diverse Nation

Finally, the U.S. population will not only be considerably older, it will also be more racially and ethnically diverse by 2060, according to projections released by the U.S. Census Bureau. It is projected that the U.S. will become a majority minority nation for the first time in 2042. Currently, minorities are now approximately 37 percent of the U.S. population and are projected to comprise 57 percent of the population in 2060. Because of our changing demographics and need to provide bilingual and bicultural health care, all nurses, including students and consumers of health care, should support ongoing efforts to promote a more diverse nursing workforce that reflects the communities that we serve. Future diverse nursing leadership can potentially serve as one of the most powerful strategies to addressing health disparities and promoting health equity that all can benefit from. Nurse educators and nurse leaders have a unique opportunity to collaborate with new or non-traditional (health care) partners that are also invested in promoting diversity (such as AARP, Urban League, National Council of La Raza/Chicanos por la Causa). There are many stakeholders that are not part of the healthcare industry, but are interested in issues of equity related to education, economics, and environment – ultimately permeating the health status of diverse communities. The Future of Nursing: Campaign for Action, led by a Diversity Steering Committee, has adopted a broad definition of diversity to reflect, “race, ethnicity, religion, creed, gender, thought, geography, sexual orientation or any aspect of identity.” The current generation of student nurses and future APRNs also have the potential to make significant and long-lasting changes by embracing and celebrating diversity and inclusivity within their own professional networks and community. In addition to education and practice roles, younger nurses, men in nursing, and ethnically diverse nurses can have a direct impact on the health and health care of ethnically diverse communities by serving on boards such as Federally Qualified Health Centers, the American Heart Association, the March of Dimes, or other non-profits to provide the much needed, diversity of thought.

Future Roles for Nurses

This is a historic time in our country in regard to healthcare. The important role of APRNs has already been noted and their clinical practice and skill will be needed to help lead cross disciplinary teams. The expansion of nurse navigator roles across settings that include long-term acute care (LTAC), nursing homes, community health, hospital, home health, schools and businesses, is also necessary and will continue to evolve. There is a critical need for more nurse scientists to participate in cross-disciplinary efforts to discover new models of care to improve the health of our nation. We will see an increasing number of nurse educators and nursing schools work across disciplines to prepare a “ready” workforce that has training in communicating and collaborating with all health care team members. Student nurses should definitely consider remaining “open” to new and emerging nurse roles and leadership. You can be a change agent to help us transform our health care system.

References


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