Foreign-Trained Registered Nurses

The pool of registered nurses that will fill vacancies in the nation’s health care system has become a public policy issue, given the aging of the health care labor force and the projected growth in health care needs by our aging citizens. Polsky, et al., recently completed a national study of a relevant topic, the supply of foreign-trained nurses, and it included the following points among others:

1. “With the current nursing shortage and reported RN vacancy rates of 10% to 15% in hospitals and nursing homes, there is currently a heightened interest in foreign-trained RNs…” [p.895]

2. “Using 2000 census data, we calculated that there were 181,000 foreign-trained RNs working in the United States in 2000, representing 9.1% of the nursing workforce…In 1990, there were only 113,000 foreign-trained RNs, representing 6.5% of the nursing workforce…a 40% increase in the number of foreign-trained RNs as a proportion of total RNs…” [p.896]

3. “…the foreign-trained group has changed [from 1990 to 2000]…Of particular note is the growth in the recruitment of foreign nurses to long-term care facilities. Although nursing homes have traditionally been more likely to employ foreign nurses than have other health care settings, employment of foreign-trained new entrant RNs in nursing homes has grown by nearly 3 times in the past decade…” [p.896]

4. “The geographic distribution of foreign-trained entrants in 1990 and 2000 shows a dramatic shift from the Mid-Atlantic and Pacific census divisions to the South and Midwest census divisions…[In terms of the sources of foreign-trained RNs, the data show] a relative shift away…from Asia…from 1990 to 2000, there was a doubling of the share of new foreign-trained RNs from Canada and a tripling in the share from Africa…” [p. 897] [Note: This geographic distribution may affect the supply of RNs for California.]

5. “From a US perspective, the wisdom of relying on foreign-trained nurses…will depend, in part, on whether this practice maintains the quality of the RN workforce…there is no evidence from our results to suggest that the foreign-trained RNs are lower-quality RNs…An important limitation was that we did not observe foreign training, experience, and RN licensure directly…Cultural competence, defined here as the ability to use a cultural understanding of patients in caring for them, which substantially affects the quality of care and is not easily captured in any data sources, could likewise be changing and having a noteworthy—and currently unmeasured—effect on the delivery of patient care in the United States…” [pp. 897-989]

6. “…compared with 1990, new foreign-trained RNs in 2000 were twice as likely to originate from low-income countries and 30% more likely to originate from countries with a low supply of nurses…Deterioration of the nursing stock of these poor countries may ultimately threaten their capacity to train nurses and replenish their nursing workforce…The impact of nurse emigration to the United States on the countries sending them requires closer examination, because this could have a large impact not only on the future ability of the United States to rely on overseas nurse recruitment but also on global health…” [p.898]


Additional abstracts of research can be viewed at our website at:

[Abstract done by Willard Hom, Director, Research & Planning Unit, System Office, California Community Colleges, 7/31/07]