

Undervalued Nurses Deserve More Respect



By Judith Woodruff

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For eight years nurses have outranked everyone else in the Gallup Organization's category of "most trusted" profession. No other profession even comes close to having the credibility that nurses have.

At the same time, pervasive stereotypical images and media portrayals have had a profound effect on the ability of nurses to be seen as leaders. When asked to picture the image of a nurse, most people will see a young woman wearing surgical scrubs at the bedside of a hospitalized patient, listening to the doctor while he examines the patient.

The reality is that nearly half of all nurses work outside hospitals — in urban and rural community settings providing care and leadership of health clinics, nursing homes, home health and hospice, churches and synagogues, businesses and schools.

Nurses are directing and managing school-based health services, including chronic disease management, mental and emotional health concerns, preventive care such as immunizations, and identifying outbreaks of infectious disease.

For more than 100 years, public health nurses in the state and local health departments have been an indispensable part of the solution to the population health problems of today — increasing health inequities, threats of infectious diseases, heightened demand for emergency preparedness and response, and an epidemic of chronic diseases.

In just a few decades, one quarter of Oregon's population will be over 65 and the fastest growing population subgroup is over 85. These very old adults have complex medical, cognitive, dental and mental health issues. With the number of physicians dwindling and significantly more people living longer, nurses will care for these people.

With the dawn of health reform, it will be the seasoned advance practice nurse who can step in to help meet the health care needs of Oregonians. We have already more than 2,000 licensed nurse practitioners who function as mainstream health care providers in various primary care and specialty roles. They diagnose and treat illness, monitor and manage chronic conditions, order and interpret diagnostic tests and prescribe medications.

Some business leaders are acutely aware that nurse leaders manage quality care for their employees, sometimes onsite at manufacturing facilities or at business-supported local clinics. More access to these nurse leaders will ultimately lower costs associated with health care and health insurance, and improve retention of valuable employees. More chronic disease management programs developed and operated by nurses means healthier employees and less time away from the job.

We look to the business community to join us in recognizing the important contribution that nurses make to ensure that workplaces are safe, employees are healthy, and high-quality health care is available for everyone.

Play your part in this effort by choosing a nurse for your corporate board of directors; provide scholarships for nurses to get advanced degrees in business, management and policy; hire a nurse to develop a chronic disease management program for your workforce; mentor a nurse to become a visible leader.

Change the image of nursing in your mind and you will change the future of Oregon.

Judith Woodruff directs Northwest Health Foundation's work force development program. She also leads the Partners Investing in Nursing's Future program, a national collaborative with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to address nursing issues through partnerships with local and regional foundations across the country.