

Nurses' Station

Don't abandon your job, patients; stand up for them!

Unite to fight nursing shortage

E. RIAN HYDE

As individual nurses, it's easy to feel isolated in struggles to deal with workplace issues. But we're really not alone. Most of our problems are common to nurses all over this country and even abroad.

And if we stand up, individually and together, to address these issues, we can resolve them.

That is the message I bring to you from the recent Professional Issues Conference held by the Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Nurses from throughout the United States and around the world were drawn together by the conference theme of "Changing the Power: Taking on the Health Care Crisis."

Global nursing shortage

The first thing we learned was that the serious nursing shortage in New York state, actually extends throughout the U.S. and Canada, and even as far away as Britain, Ireland, and New Zealand.

While managed care has been a major contributor in creating the shortage, for nurses the problem boils down to two issues — pay and working conditions.

The U.S. has approximately 2.5 million nurses, and it hopes to add 800,000 more by the end of 2005. But pay for RN's in this country fell by 5.6 percent (adjusted for inflation) between 1993 and 1999.

Poor pay undermines recruitment, our professional status, and our career goals.

But while better pay is an important start, it would be only half the battle.

More and more nurses are saying, "I don't care how much you pay me, I am not willing to put my family second. I am not willing to put my license at risk. And I am just too tired to go on with this struggle. So, I am not doing this job any longer!"

Remedies or ruin?

The nursing shortage is rooted in profound changes that have been taking place within the health-care industry. And the industry's response to the shortage has aggravated the problem.

John August, who heads healthcare organizing at AFT, confirmed what PEF nurses know too well: both public and private health-care providers have tried

THEIR DAY — Timia "Trinz" Trent, Frances Woody and Anne Siminski, PEF nurses at Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office, enjoy PEF Division 280's Nurses' Recognition Day celebration in June.



to cut costs and make up for fewer nurses by resorting to mandatory overtime, short-staffing, assigning nurses outside their areas of training and expertise, handing over professional nursing duties to assistive personnel, and contracting for per-diem nurses from agencies.

While these "therapies" may promise short-term relief to painful nurse shortages, they do far more long-term harm than good, according to August, by driving experienced nurses away from direct care.

Patients suffering too

Such career choices are agonizing for nurses because we are committed to our patients and to our profession. This isn't just about us. It is about our patients, too.

Patients don't need to wait and wait for a nurse when they need one. Patients don't need to depend on care from a harried and exhausted nurse who is on his or her third mandated shift in a week. And they don't need to depend on aides and untrained non-professionals to provide professional services.

Patients need prompt, skilled, professional nursing care.

Ask any nurse, "Would you abandon your patient?" The answer is a resounding "No!"

But what are we doing, if we don't stand up for our patients? For quality health care? For reasonable work schedules, and full staffing? If we don't lobby our legislators for change? Or become active in our profession to address the issues? Or protect the Nurse

Practice Act?

If we don't stand up for these things, aren't we, in effect, abandoning our patients and ourselves?

Stand up

We are not helpless bystanders. We can file contract grievances, call in the Health Department, participate when the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Organizations (JCAHO) surveys our worksites, put our nursing issues on our labor-management agenda, contact our legislators, and work with our union leaders and staff.

While we can't refuse an objectionable assignment, we can notify PEF and turn in a PEF "Protest of Assignment Form" to our supervisor and the union.

Yes, there is a world-wide nursing shortage, and we've been through this before. Remember the early 1980s? We know how our employers have chosen to respond. But what will make the difference today, is how we respond!

Let's make nursing a profession where we can go home at the end of the workday, instead of the end of the whole day, and be able to say "Job well done; I feel good about my job because I gave my patients the care they deserve."

Stand up and speak up for our patients! Change the power! Take on the health-care crisis!

The writer is chair of the PEF Nurses Committee.

**Call PEF nurse organizer
Lenore Boris at 1-800-342-4306,
ext. 340 to learn how you can help
the PEF Nurses Committee stand
up for nursing.**