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Men in Nursing: Filling in the Ranks

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Women are the overwhelming majority in the nursing field. But students and faculty at the Linfield-Good Samaritan School of Nursing say more effort needs to be made to attract men into nursing including marketing, promotion and maybe even a name change.

Men in nursing

Filling in the ranks

Fred Calixtro sees a marketing problem.

Paul Higgins '06 says it's an underpromoted career.

David Silva '04 thinks the name is a turn-off.

All three agree that nursing needs more men. The question is how to get them. The good news is that although the number of male nurses is small, it has grown in the last 20 years. According to a 2000 survey by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the number of men working as RNs in 1980 was 45,060 or

2.7 percent of all nurses. By 2000, that percentage had doubled to 5.4 percent of the nursing population – 146,902.

Calixtro, an assistant professor of nursing at the Linfield-Good Samaritan School of Nursing, is used to being in the minority. He is the only man on the 19-member nursing faculty at LGSSN and was one of only seven men in his 70-member graduating class when he completed his nursing degree in his native Philippines.

However, he said, male nurses were not that unusual there. His first job was in a cardiac center, where 20 to 30 percent of the nurses on staff were men. He later worked in the Middle East and then in Phoenix, Ariz., where he got his start in teaching – as the only male faculty member in nursing.

“They were so happy I was teaching because they wanted a male figure in the nursing program, so male students could have a role model,” he said.

The nursing profession does a poor job of marketing itself, Calixtro said. The public at large has little or no idea, for example, that nurses play a large role in assessing and diagnosing patients.

“We are at the bedside 24 hours a day, and we see what happens from the moment the patient comes in,” he said. “The doctors will come in maybe five minutes a day, and it’s the nurses who tell them what happened the last 24 hours.”

Nurses, especially male nurses, must become more visible and get into the schools, talk to students and educate them about the profession, Calixtro said. Students get exposed to traditionally male professions such as firefighting, law enforcement, engineering and the military, so why not nursing?

Higgins agrees, noting that boys are not introduced to nursing as a viable career option. Even with two aunts who work in the profession, Higgins never considered it until he decided on a major career change. After 16 years in the restaurant business, Higgins began exploring careers in health care because of the job security.

“I think people have a misperception of nursing,” he said. “Perhaps it has been perceived as primarily comforting the patient. But the type of nursing I am getting exposed to is very technical. It’s a very difficult profession.”

Higgins enrolled at Linfield after taking a few science courses at Portland Community College which he enjoyed immensely and which sparked his interest in the medical field. He explored other career options such as radiology and dental hygiene but ultimately focused on nursing because it offers more options. And being one of only 21 male nursing students on the Portland Campus has its advantages, Higgins said.

“I’m where I want to learn, and I’m glad I stick out,” he said. “Instructors know who I am in the first two days. I think it’s easier to get to know them on a personal basis.”

As a sophomore, Higgins has completed only a couple of clinical rotations, but right now he is leaning toward

trauma and critical care nursing. He wants to keep his options open, although he prefers fast-paced work. And he knows nursing school was the right choice for him.

“It’s exciting and it’s rewarding,” he said. “Every day is something new. It’s difficult, and it’s challenging. But all the effort you put into it, you get right back.”

Silva’s route to nursing school was a bit circuitous. He was a volunteer firefighter in his native Portugal, where he became interested in emergency medicine. He moved to the United States, and while studying to become a paramedic, he got a firsthand look at the role of the ER nurse. He knew the burnout rate for Emergency Medical Technicians was high, so he decided to take the next step, skipping the EMT certification and enrolling in nursing school. He didn’t view nursing as a female profession in Portugal and, based on anecdotal evidence, suggests there may be nearly an equal number of male and female nurses there.

Silva proposes a more radical approach – changing the name of the profession. The term “nursing” carries a female connotation, he says, and that’s a deterrent in appealing to young men.

Silva has done his research and cites various statistics and studies. One is a study by Dan Gorman, a nurse manager in Winchester, Mass., who surveyed junior high students on their perceptions of nursing. The students indicated they thought of the profession as having influence, power and opportunity for advancement, yet only 6 percent of those surveyed said they would consider a career in nursing. However, when

asked whether they would consider it if the title were changed to a more gender-neutral name such as “registered clinician,” 21 percent said they would.

Silva admits his suggestion could run into resistance, so he takes every opportunity to discuss the idea with others. He has mentioned it to some nurses and found them supportive. Reactions from both male and female classmates also have been positive when he explains his reasoning, he said.

“What keeps me going on this name change is the feedback I keep getting from people,” Silva said. “Every time I have an opportunity, I ask folks about it. We need a new name for the 21st century nurse.”

All three men agree it will take time for society to change, but shifts are already occurring, Calixtro noted, as more high schools begin to see the health care profession as something stable that guarantees work.

– Mardi Mileham

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