

Nursing Week has flurry of media coverage of the profession

While there were a spate of activities recognizing the contribution of nurses for National Nursing week there was a full-scale flurry of media coverage of the problems facing the profession.

The SARS crisis spawned a flurry of news media reports the shortage of nurses and the weaknesses of a health system running short staffed. "More than 20 percent of all nursing hours are now worked on overtime, leaving nurses tired and at greater risk of mistakes," Andre Picard wrote in the Globe and Mail. The Registered Nurses Association of Ontario published a study on part-time nursing that also pointed to lessons of the SARS outbreak: "SARS was a reminder that we currently have no redundancy or safety cushion in our health-care system, and left us gravely concerned about its capacity to deal with another crisis."

In the Montreal Gazette Mike Boone wrote: "Nurses are overworked, underpaid and taken for granted. Canadians expect first-rate health care from a system that's falling apart at the seams... In the best of all possible worlds, every week would be Nursing Week. Or at least every year ought to include 52 weeks in which we honour caregivers - nurses, teachers, day-care workers and anyone else who is paid in inverse proportion to their true value in society."

UNA advertises widely for Nursing Week

UNA has radio and newspaper ads running across the province this week with the message that Safe care of our patients...is the first concern of Registered nurses. The ads will be appearing in daily and weekly newspapers all over the province and on radio stations as well. Copies of the advertising, including an MP3 file of the radio ad are available for downloading on the UNA website, www.una.ab.ca

The print advertising also refer to one of the conclusions drawn in a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association last year: "Registered nurses constitute an around-the-clock surveillance system in hospitals for early detection and prompt intervention when patients' conditions deteriorate. The effectiveness of nurse surveillance is influenced by the number of Registered nurses available to assess patients..."

Jane Sustrik starts bald craze that raises over \$14,000

Jane Sustrik's plan to shave her head spearheaded a drive that ended up raising \$14,000 for medical research and the Kids With Cancer Society. Jane's goal was far surpassed at the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) Convention May 3 where she actually did shave all her hair off. The UNA Vice-president had promised to bare her head if \$5,000 could be raised for Kids With Cancer, but by the time the "mass hairsteria" took over at the AFL Convention, seven people had gone close-cropped for the cause. AFL President Les Steel was the second to jump into the frenzy, saying if Jane's \$5,000 target was reached, he'd shave his head too.

"It was a lot of fun," says Jane Sustrik, "it really took off and together we chipped in a lot of money to help kids. There's a lot more people enjoying the cool spring breezes on their heads than I expected, and I don't think they had ever thought they'd be going home from the Convention bald."

When the craze got started it really started to roll, Jane explained. One of the young people who was there to talk about her experience at the AFL Kids Camp said she'd pay \$50 if her Dad, a Convention delegate, would shave his head. Dad did. Visiting nurses from Russia must have been surprised when one of their hosts, a Grant MacEwan employee who came from Russia four years ago, hustled up nearly \$700 more to go under the blade. Two women from United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) got barbered and raised \$4,000 for leukemia research, their union's charity.

This week Jane Sustrik presented the \$10,000 to Kids With Cancer. The organization helps a whole family cope with a diagnosis of cancer in a child. They support comprehensive, family-centred support programs that play a big part in children's recovery.

National nurse survey hitting the mail

A national survey of 24,000 nurses begins this month and questionnaires will begin arriving in Alberta nurses' mailboxes soon. The questionnaire's authors want nurses to take it seriously, they say it's "your chance to steer the future of nursing." The Building the Future project aims to be the first "comprehensive picture of the state of nursing human resources in Canada - both now and for the future." Backed by Health Canada and Human Resources and Development the project has been endorsed and participated in by a wide range of nursing "stakeholders." More information on the project's website: www.buildingthefuture.ca

Ontario survey shows more nurses want full-time work, but not all

About 11% more nurses would be working full-time, if they had their choice, according to a survey released by the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO). That alone would be a significant boost to the nursing workforce, the RNAO says, but even more nurses would be willing to work full-time if conditions were improved. Nearly half (42.7%) of the nurses say they would be willing to move to full-time if conditions changed. The Nurses' organization points out that would be the equivalent of 6,000 new full-time nurses.

The results also showed that overall part-time and casual nurses would like to work more hours than they get. Increasing the hours for these nurses by the average increase they want, just 3.2 hours a week, would add the equivalent of 2,900 full-time RNs in Ontario.

The mail survey of 5,000 Ontario nurses had a high 40% response rate and the research is statically valid and representative of nurses in the province.

Family considerations were cited by most nurses as their reason for working part-time, but lack of availability of full-time jobs, heavy workloads, and time for further education were also important.

The RNAO suggests caution in concluding the full-time workforce could be quickly increased. "... it is one thing to agree to a hypothetical question, quite another for the system to deliver all the changes necessary, and yet another thing for nurses to be convinced that the system has truly strengthened its commitment to nursing. Realistically, it would likely take some time to lure many RNs back to full-time employment."

Health Regions want to create more full-time positions?

At the bargaining table the Health Regions have been pushing hard for changes to clear what they say are blocks to creating more full-time nursing positions. But the UNA Negotiating Committee presented hard evidence this week of the fact that Regions may not be that committed to creating full-time jobs. The Calgary Health Region is opening a new mental health unit at the Rockyview Hospital, with nearly 25 new jobs, not one of which is full-time. At the Red Deer Regional Hospital a new Unit has 18 new positions, and only one is full-time.

Testing for mould continues at Foothills

An Alberta Workplace and Occupational Safety Committee began testing last week for toxic mould or other contamination at the Foothills Hospital last week. Workplace Health and Safety struck the committee after the UNA Local insisted it look into concerns about toxic mould, and staff health problems UNA appointed expert, Karen Rollins, to the Committee which has been visiting affected units at the Foothills Hospital. Samples have been sent off for testing for mould or other toxic problems on the units where many nurses have been experiencing a range of symptoms.

Negotiations continue in mediation

The UNA provincial Negotiating Committee continues to meet with mediator Alan Beattie, at the Health Regions bargaining table, although they report only slow progress on the issues, and the Employers' long slate of proposed roll backs. Mediation with PHAA (Provincial Health Authorities of Alberta) continued May 7, 8 and 13. Talks will continue May 21, 22 and 23 and further dates have been set in June to review a discussion paper on the issues that Beattie is drafting.

In the latest talks the mediator spent most of the time meeting separately with UNA and the Employers. Discussion focussed on a number of issues in bargaining including: mobility (moving nurses site to site on temporary or permanent basis), scheduling (assigning permanent evening or permanent night shifts, percentage of day duty, percentage of full-time positions) and designated days of rest for part-time Employees. Because of the extent of the Employer rollbacks and the fact that the Employers have never responded to any proposals from the union, the task of mediation is more difficult than is normally the case.

Co-Chair of the UNA Negotiating Committee Bridget Faherty has resigned from the team for health reasons and has been replaced by Jan Robinson (Alternate Facility Representative from North District). "Bridget will be missed greatly but Jan has already joined us in meetings with the mediator," Chief Negotiator David Harrigan reports. Pauline Worsfold is the new co-Chair representing Facility Locals and Sandy Johnson is the co-Chair for Community Locals.

Further bargaining dates have yet to be set at the other tables involved in the negotiation round, with the Continuing Care Employers' Bargaining Association, the Alberta Cancer Board, The Good Samaritan Society and Bethany Care Cochrane.

Information on Negotiations is provided regularly on the UNA website: www.una.ab.ca.

U.S. Senate introduces bill to protect patients, hold hospitals accountable for RN staffing

Legislation was introduced in the U.S. Senate in Washington this week to ensure that patients receive safe, quality nursing care in hospitals and other health care institutions. The legislation would implement nurse-to-patient ratios, with nurse input into determining ratios, across the U.S. It also provides whistle-blower protection for nurses who speak out about patient care problems.

The American Nurses Association lobbied strongly for the Bill and worked with Senator Daniel Inouye in drafting the law. "Inappropriate nurse staffing is the number one concern of nurses today," said ANA President Barbara Blakeney. "This legislation is needed to improve the work environment for nurses, to enhance retention of practicing nurses and recruitment into the profession."

Sponsored by a Democrat Senator, there is no assurance that the proposed legislation will become law.