

College aims to tap into wealth of foreign-trained nurses

Algonquin program would make it easier for nurses to be certified to work in Canada

BY JOANNE LAUCIUS

Algonquin College is introducing a project to prepare foreign-trained nurses to practise as registered nurses in Ontario.

"There is a nursing shortage," said Carmen Hust, the leader of the project.

"We see immigrants as a trained workforce."

The program, which begins its first phase in the next few weeks, is the only Ottawa-area pilot project in a provincewide effort to offer foreign-trained nurses a recognized education so they can remain in the health-care field.

It will help fight the shortage of nurses by tapping into a source of trained health professionals who need additional

training to get Canadian accreditation.

According to a recent report from the Canadian Nurses Association, Canada's nursing schools, which produced about 4,600 graduates in 2000, are expected to produce more than 9,000 in 2007.

Starting last year, it was expected that there will be about 1,200 new additions each year from outside Canada.

Still, that will not be enough fill the demand for nurses as the population ages. The association estimates there will be a shortage of 78,000 nurses by 2011, and 113,000 nurses by 2016.

In November, Ontario premier Ernie Eves announced that foreign-trained doctors

will be eligible for a fast-track assessment under a new program that will target underserved communities.

That same month, federal Human Resources Development Minister Jane Stewart said more than 60 per cent of new immigrants to Canada have earned post-secondary degrees in their native countries. Of those, nearly half are trained to work in regulated industries such as medicine and engineering. But many are working as cab drivers and cleaners, Ms. Stewart said.

About two years ago, the province called for proposals to get foreign-trained professionals working in their fields, said Ms. Hust.

The problem for foreign-trained nurses is that they need to work while they are upgrading their credentials.

They may also lack English

skills specific to nursing.

"Language is often a major obstacle," said Ms. Hust. "So is money."

"They can't face years of education and no job."

Algonquin's project offers a curriculum that allows foreign-trained nurses to enter at three possible points, then move up the steps towards registered nurse accreditation.

The student is assessed by the College of Nurses of Ontario. They may enter the program at the lowest rung, to qualify as a personal support worker.

That program, which teaches skills in such areas as bathing and caring for a patient, typically takes six months. Under the project, it can be completed within eight weeks by a foreign-trained nurse.

Accreditation as a personal care worker allows a nurse to

work at a job that pays about \$10 an hour instead of working at minimum-wage, said Ms. Hust.

The next step is to get accreditation as a registered practical nurse.

The final step is the degree program in nursing, a requirement which all nurses will need starting in 2005.

The first foreign-trained nurses will begin the personal support worker program in the coming weeks, with another program set to begin in April.

The first personal support worker class has 17 students registered so far, trained in places as diverse as China, Iran, the Philippines, Central Europe and Africa, said Ms. Hust.

In September, the first registered practical nurse program is slated to begin, followed by the registered nurse program in September 2004.