

Fixing the nurse shortage

Fast-tracked programs such as one offered at Algonquin help close gap in demand for health care workers

BY ELAINE O'CONNOR

To help address the issue of a shortage of health care workers, Algonquin College has created four new skill and credential programs for foreign-trained nurses looking to work in Ontario. It's the only Ottawa-area pilot project in a provincewide drive to help foreign-trained nurses get Canadian certification.

According to a recent Canadian Nurses Association report, Canada's nursing schools, which produced 4,600 graduates in 2000, are expected to produce more than 9,000 in 2007 as governments, reacting to predicted shortages, fund more spaces for students in the country's education faculties.

Yet the increase will not likely be enough to offset the future demand for nurses. The association estimates there will be a shortage of 78,000 nurses by 2011, and 113,000 nurses by 2016. As early as 2006, the Canadian Institute for Health Information warns in a 2003 report, Canada could lose 28 per cent of its entire nursing staff if all nurses eligible to retire at 55 (most don't stay till 65) do so. In Ontario, more than 53 per cent of the registered nurses with the College of Nurses of Ontario are currently over 45.

To make the most of existing foreign-trained nurses in Ontario, Algonquin received \$21.148 from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities in 2002 to design a curriculum that allows foreign-trained nurses access to the language and skills upgrading they need to be accredited by the College of Nurses of Ontario.

"The saddest thing for me is when I talk to somebody who is a nurse or wants to be a nurse and is disillusioned because they say that's too long or too hard," says Carmen Hust, project leader of Algonquin's foreign-trained nursing program.

"This program really fills a huge need for them."

That the program brings a diverse group of nurses from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds into the city's health care system is a bonus. Nurses enrolled in the program hail from Somalia, Yugoslavia, the United Arab Emirates, China, Kenya, Egypt, Brazil and the Philippines.

At a basic level, a foreign-trained nurse can take a preparatory course before taking the College of Nurses of Ontario board exam, to help mitigate the impact of language and cultural differences on test results. This program, called CARE (Creating Access to Regulated Employment), started in April 2003 with a group of 22 who will write the board exam this month. (If a foreign-

trained nurse has been practising in his or her country of origin in the last five years and passes the exam, they are permitted to practise.)

Algonquin also offers English-as-a-second-language courses tailored to nurses. For those nurses who have not been practising recently, or who have been assessed by the College and found to need further training, Algonquin offers three programs.

Nurses interested in working quickly can take an eight-week course (usually seven months, but nurses are awarded advanced standing for their experience) to qualify as a personal support worker. The first group of 15 foreign-trained nurses in the program began in January and graduated this past April. All of them are working, which is key when "many of these nurses are also supporting families that they have immigrated with," says Ms. Hust, a professor in Algonquin's School of Health and Community Studies.

To become accredited as a registered practical nurse, the students embark on a seven-month diploma program (normally a two-year undertaking) taking classes in areas such as psychology, pharmacology, and nursing theory, to fill in gaps in training. The final program on offer is the 18-month bachelor's degree program in nursing (which would normally take four years), a requirement for all Ontario nurses starting in 2005. The first registered practical nurse program began this fall, and will be followed by the degree program in September 2004.

Overall, the training initiative aims to help between 60 and 70 participants each year, Vietnamese nurse Xuong Tran among them.

Ms. Tran was hesitant about coming to Canada, as stories she had heard led her to believe she would

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BRUNO SCHLUMBERGER

Vietnamese nurse Xuong Tran, above, says Algonquin's accelerated retraining program meant she didn't have to start from scratch. Project leader Carmen Hust, right, says the nursing program fills a huge need.

have to put aside her 11 years' experience nursing in Vietnam, and start over.

So even before she came to Canada seven months ago, she started researching the transition with the Ontario College of Nurses. As soon as she and her husband arrived in Ottawa she went to speak to Ms. Hust at Algonquin and started the process of recertification.

"I contacted (the college) before I came here, for the paperwork, because I wanted everything to be done before I came here, so I don't have any problems," says Ms. Tran, 34, a former hospital ICU and post-operative nurse.

Ms. Tran has finished the ESL-for-nurses course and this fall she begins the seven-month practical nursing diploma program. She aims to work as an examination room nurse.

"The course that I took helped me in grammar, to review that and have a chance to talk, to prepare me to take my nursing course, because I have studied ... in my language, not in English," she says.

To her, Algonquin's accelerated

courses have made all the difference. "I was very happy when I knew that they had a program for the foreigners who came to this country who want to continue their career, because we are not young," Ms. Tran laughs. "I don't want to go to school for two or three years and study again to be a nurse. No, no, I don't want that."

Now, she says with relief, "it seems to me that everything will go smoothly."

Foreign-trained professional fast-track programs like this are exactly what's needed to close the gap in demand for health care workers, agrees TalentWorks executive director Cheryl Gorman.

"They've done a really good job of not making everybody start from scratch," says Ms. Gorman, who has been working closely with the city to develop strategies to meet Ottawa's workforce needs.

"They focus on providing gap training for that as opposed to assuming that everybody is starting with a blank slate and having to go through it all."



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