

*(Editor's note: We take great pride in presenting op-ed pieces written by members of the first graduating class of RNs from the Bachelor of Science Nursing program run by Algonquin College and the University of Ottawa - thus the column's name, "First Class Nursing." The columns will explore health and lifestyle opportunities from a fresh perspective. We hope you enjoy them!)*



## **The Ignored Pillar of Healthcare Special to The Observer By Deborah Younger-Lewis**

With the majority of people's time and effort going into the physician shortage, the importance of addressing the nursing shortage is being ignored. As a resident of the County of Renfrew, and a soon to be Registered Nurse (RN) (Spring 2008), I recognize the lack of physicians and the need to solve that problem. However, this should not overshadow the dwindling numbers of nurses -- professionals who are a pillar of our healthcare system.

Nurses are a vital component of healthcare and vital to the health of Canadians. Nurses are the ones who keep the health care system running and without nurses the health of Canadians would deteriorate. The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) predicts the country will have a shortage of 78 000 nurses by 2011 and 113 000 by 2016. These startling numbers show that the nursing shortage can be interpreted as a crisis.

Why is the nursing shortage developing (or have already developed) into a crisis? Nurses are leaving the profession at both ends of the spectrum. According to the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario (RNAO) in 2007, 56% of nurses were over the age of 45 and will be considering retiring in 10-15 years. But do not worry --over half of the nursing population who will be retiring will be replaced by new graduate nurses, right? Wrong. The total number of graduates still falls short of the anticipated need for 15 400 new nurses by 2011, (Barbara Sibbald, Canadian Medical Association Journal).

In addition to not enough new graduating nurses, the CNA estimates up to 15% of new graduate nurses leave Canada in search of stable employment in

the United States. To successfully recruit and retain nurses in Ontario, studies found a key reason why Ontario RNs leave the country was the need for full-time stable employment and the associated benefits. The RNAO advocates for 70% full-time employment for RNs because “the continuity of care and quality of care provided cannot be achieved with the current low levels of full-time employment amongst RNs.”

There are some excellent initiatives in Ontario to tackle the nursing shortage but more are needed. For example, the Ontario government promises all new nursing graduates a full-time job. This program is called the New Grad Initiative and I plan on taking advantage of what it offers. However, it offers me a full-time job for only 3 to 7 months then I am offered a part-time job. This makes me think, will I be enticed to head south in search of full-time employment?

Michael Dector, former chair of the Health Council of Canada and the Canadian Institute for Health Information, states that Ontario’s five biggest healthcare problems are chronic disease, effective regionalized administration, electronic records and prescribing, the doctor shortage and wait times. Unfortunately, this “experienced healthcare analyst” does not even hint that we are facing a crisis with the nursing shortage. Do nurses even make the top ten? Nurses should not fall in the shadow of these other healthcare problems.

If the nursing crisis is not made one of the most important problems to solve, then the bricks that help healthcare stand strong will crumble. The quality of care for Canadians will have to be put on the shoulders of overworked, exhausted nurses. One day I will need a nurse to improve my health. I just hope one will be there when that day comes.