

(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!)



Calling Out to Future Nurses: Are You Up to the Challenge?

Special to The Observer By Kristen Darraugh

Some of you may be at the point in your life where you are struggling with the idea of where to go next. In the Spring of 2004 I was in that dither. I was trying to find direction. I knew that I had an interest in the health care field, but I also knew that I wanted to be in school as little time as

possible! So, I applied for a few different programs, like Massage Therapy and Psychology, thinking that I might find something that I could enjoy. Then one day I ended up choosing to become an RN. What an eye-opener I had when school finally started! The classes were long, and the content endless. I felt like I was floating through school with a cloud of questions buzzing around me. The placements were great, and I enjoyed them immensely, but four years seemed like a long time to become 'just a nurse'. It has taken me the last four years to realize the importance of nurses, and to accept the challenge in front of me.

Why spend the time going through such a tough program when the publicity around nursing is less than desirable? Overworked. Undervalued. This publicity has an impact on people's choice to enter the nursing field. Statistics Canada reports that the enrollment in Canadian schools of nursing has been steadily declining since the early 1990s. As well, we're the career that's said to have the highest stress, most days off due to illness and injury, etc.

Some positive points that are not highly publicized include the fact that RNs have one of the lowest unemployment rates in the general workforce. Not too shabby! And in 2005 approximately 85% of nurses had permanent jobs. This is great too! And what about the respect and reward that we feel as nurses?

The SARS crisis is a perfect example of how nurses are respected. It was the nurses in the hospitals in Toronto that stayed on to provide care, and who risked their lives in doing so. The deaths of two nurses during this time really brought to light what the role of nurses entails, and the passion that drives a nurse.

Nurses function independently, and as part of health care teams. It is important for nurses to be recognized as an integral part of the health care picture. We have a critical role in the health of the individuals, families and communities with whom we work and provide care for. We are the front-line staff, and it is our critical thinking and clinical judgment that are so important in the health care system. We triage in the ERs, we advocate for policy changes, we provide care for people who are unable to meet their basic needs and we will continue through the negative publicity that we face.

Additionally, the possibilities for the direction of your career are endless -- the sky is the limit! There are teaching roles, administration roles, community roles, home care roles, and hospital roles to name a few. And it is possible to navigate through these roles throughout a career, or stay in one area for the duration. It's up to you.

So as the end of my schooling is upon me, and I have but weeks to go, I smile when I think that I will be out in the workforce soon, as the best RN I can be. And when I am leaving the floor at the end of my shift, and a patient calls out to me (by first name) and says "thank you!" I remember why I've done it, and why I will continue to learn and grow as a nurse with passion.