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To meet demand for nurses, we need more educators

Quality health care for this generation depends on Idaho's ability to meet current and future demand for nurses. While recent headlines suggested that Idaho would be facing a nurse surplus, a more critical view indicates otherwise. Idaho will be challenged with a shortage of nurses unless the state maintains its commitment to nurse education.

The current economic slowdown has temporarily eased chronic vacancies as nurses returned to the work force and consumers delay health care services. But, when the economy improves, vacancies will rise as demand for health care increases and nurses resume plans to retire or return to pre-recession schedules. It takes on the average four years to educate a nurse; students who start today will not enter the work force until 2013 when both the economy and demand for services will be different.

Because of the aging of the baby boomers, by 2016, health care will be the state's fastest-growing, largest and highest-paying industry. By 2016 Idaho's population age 55 and older is expected to increase nearly 50 percent. Only one in five nurses currently practicing in Idaho is younger than age 35. The majority of nurses who provide care or who are nurse educators today, will themselves be consumers of health care services tomorrow.

In the next nine years Idaho will need just over 7,500 more nurses to meet demand due to economic growth, replace retirees and others leaving the profession and to fill chronic vacancies. Assuming the state's current investments in nurse education facilities and programs will continue and not be eroded by budget cuts in higher education, we anticipate meeting the projected demand.

However, meeting the future demand for nurses also depends on the state's capacity to train and attract nursing instructors. Today, nursing education in Idaho fails to meet the rising demand for nurses with master's degrees or doctoral degrees. A lack of doctoral and post-graduate programs necessary for preparing educators means the shortage will continue to grow. If we fail to educate the educators of tomorrow in adequate numbers, our basic nursing education programs will not be able to expand as planned.

Governor Otter's Nursing Workforce Advisory Council is a group of dedicated health care professionals representing health care, education and government. The council made several recommendations to the governor based on research data commissioned through the Idaho Department of Labor.

Retain and increase nursing faculty to meet a growing demand for educators. In 2008, each nursing faculty opening in Idaho drew an average of just over two applicants. Educators with advanced practice certificates earn only 57 percent of what they could earn in a private health care setting. One way to address this issue is to increase salaries for nurse educators, expand doctoral programs and provide incentives for nurses to enter the world of teaching.

Continue to support expanded educational capacity across the range of degree options. If we don't continue making investments in producing nurses, not only will a shortage of nurses with advanced training persist statewide, but some regions of the state will continue to experience chronic vacancies across the range of nurse licenses.

Continue the nursing work force initiative and expand it to include all components of health care. Doing so will ensure all health care program expansion decisions are data driven, and future investments align with regional supply-demand forecasts.

A key assumption in anticipation of meeting nursing demand in the future is the availability of nurse educators. If we fail to address this shortage, we are only pretending that the problem has been solved.

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