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Action needed to attract more nurses

THE Medical Development Advisory Committee projected that 5,000 nurses would be needed within the next five years. And the 9,000-strong Association of Hongkong Nursing Staff recently agreed that foreign staff be brought in because of a shortfall of 800 nurses last year. The number of registered nurses per 100,000 population has increased five times since 1960. Why do we have a shortage of nurses?

The birth rate in Hongkong has lowered. The size of the age group of late teens to twenties has shrunk so the supply of youngsters to the nurse labour market is smaller.

A few decades ago, when a nursing career was one of the main routes for entering the middle classes, nowadays more professions, such as law and business, have opened up for females. Women today have many more career options other than nurses, for example, half of the 4th year Law students in University of Hongkong are females.

These occupations offer higher economic rewards and less unso- ciable hours. Though university degree programmes for nurses are underway in both the Chinese University and the Polytechnic, it will take time to prove the attrac- tions of nursing as a career.

While the supply of nursing candidates is diminishing, the demand for them is increasing. New giant hospitals in Chai Wan and Tuen Mun require enormous numbers of nurses for their opera- tions. The recently opened Tuen Mun Hospital is not yet under full operation, with wards unused and with camp beds around, due to shortage of manpower.

In addition, the improvement in quality of health care for the Hongkong public has also in- creased demand for a large num- ber of nurses. A higher nurse to pa- tient ratio is required for the increased use of high technology in settings such as the Intensive Care Unit and in surgery.

Other factors which have con- tributed to the rising demand of health care are increasing income, expanded availability of health in- surance through employers and in- dividuals, and an increase in the elderly population.

The Medical Development Ad- visory Committee recommended that the Government recruit nurses from abroad. Hongkong might then enter into regional and global competition for quality nurses. Expansion of nursing school enrolments to improve the supply of nurses is unlikely to be an ultimate solution given the de- mographic trends and the declin-

ing interest of young people in nursing careers.

Recruiting inactive nurses into the work force will not be effec- tive, given the already high em- ployment rate among nurses and the low wage of about \$55 per hour, compared with about \$75 for dispensers.

Many women, especially young mothers, want to work reg- ular, daytime hours and will even choose less interesting, less skilled, and worse paying jobs to accom- plish this. Appealing working con- ditions such as child care services near to work sites, and improved esteem of nursing profession would be useful means to retain nurses.

Further development of the current ward steward system could free the nurses more for their clinical duties.

The number of nurse candi- dates has dropped, demand for nurses is on the rise and we have a continuous outflow of nurses due to the nurse shortage in developed countries.

The Hongkong Government should seriously analyse the la- bour market for nurses and re- structure the present working con- ditions and terms to solve the problem.

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