

Pharmacy Work Force Shortage: Implications for Practice

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Ms. White, Director of Pharmacy, Stanford Hospital and Clinics, Stanford, California, and a former ASHP president, was a member of the American Hospital Association (AHA) Commission on Workforce for Hospitals and Health Systems. Her presentation blended the insights she gained as a result of her participation in this multidisciplinary group with her knowledge of past and current pharmacy work force issues.

The Health Care Work Force

Health care is the third-largest industry in the United States. Approximately 11.3 million people are employed in some 460,000 health care settings.

Health care is growing faster than other segments of the economy. The number of new jobs created in this country is projected to grow by 15 percent from 1998 to 2008; however, in health care, a 26 percent growth is projected. Overall, the number of jobs that will become available in the next decade is expected to exceed the number of qualified workers by 1.7 million. Health care will be competing with other fields for this limited supply of new workers. Unfortunately, health care is a less desirable source of employment than it once was. The 24/7 nature of many jobs, the need to work evening and night shifts, and the increasing demands placed on health care workers to do more with less are among the causes. Moreover, the current health care work force is aging; the average age of nurses is 45. These developments, coupled with the stresses placed on the system by a growing, aging patient population, create a problem of major proportions.

The Pharmacy Work Force

The pharmacy work force shortage is acute and shows no signs of improving. The projected number of new graduates entering the field will not keep pace with the need. Moreover, while applications to schools of pharmacy have risen since 1999, a major concern is the lack of qualified pharmacy faculty to educate and train these people.

AHA has made a commitment to work toward these goals, particularly with respect to building societal support. The association has disseminated the task force report broadly. Health care management groups have already begun to use it.

Implementing Strategies for Overcoming the Work Force Shortage

Tackling the work force shortage will entail the design and implementation of short- and long-term strategies. Key to the success of any strategy must be an appreciation of generational differences and how they play out in the workplace.

Impact of Generational Differences

Members of at least three generations, each brought up in a different culture and with different priorities, work side by side in health care today: the traditionalists (i.e., those born before 1946); the baby-boom generation (born between 1946 and 1964); Generation X (1965 and 1980). Effective pharmacy managers must focus on what their employees want and be aware that motivations may differ, not only from person to person but also from generation to generation. Of particular importance to younger workers are more flexible working schedules.

Short-term Strategies

Short-term strategies center on two activities: recruitment and retention.

Recruitment. One effective recruitment strategy is to make pharmacy more visible. Emphasizing visibility is a win-win enterprise. It increases the job satisfaction of the current work force, and it attracts more recruits to the field. Managers need to be

Recommendations of the AHA Commission on Workforce for Hospitals and Health Systems

In its April 2002 report, "*In Our Hands*," the AHA Commission on Work force for Hospitals and Health Systems made the following suggestions for overcoming current and projected shortages in pharmacy, nursing, and other areas.

- Foster meaningful work. Redesign work patterns so that persons with the greatest training and expertise perform intellectually stimulating tasks and are not tied up with busy work.
- Improve the workplace. Create a culture where all workers feel valued. Don't think only of the financial bottom line.
- Broaden the base. Make explicit efforts to attract more women, minorities, and immigrants to health care.
- Collaborate. Emphasize a team approach to health care.
- Build societal support. Broaden understanding of health care issues among regulatory and legislative agencies at the state and federal levels.

continually on the lookout for ways to increase the visibility of their staff, both within the workplace and in the community. Residency programs and clerkships can be excellent feeders for the pharmacy department. Outreach to students can occur in conjunction with a hospitalwide program sponsored by the human resources department; however, the pharmacy department can also do it independently.

Recruitment should focus not only on the young. Many health systems are seeking to attract older workers who have left the field and are providing the training these people would need to re-enter practice.

Retention. Employees remain with an organization when they feel needed and feel that their efforts are appreciated. The message from leaders should be “We appreciate your work,” not “Can’t you do that faster (or more cheaply)?”

A sense of belonging is important, and loyalty begins with employee orientation. Orientation is not simply a time to train new employees in the department’s way of doing things; it is the time to assimilate them into the organization and help them develop a shared vision.

Managers should take every opportunity to showcase their departments. Pharmacy Week is one such occasion. Managers can take advantage of this national event to launch community public relations campaigns as well as internal programs aimed at nursing or medical staff. The support of the institution’s administration is also a factor in retention: administrators have to “walk the walk and talk the talk.” An awareness of the cost of recruiting and training new employees should serve as a strong incentive to making life more desirable for current employees.

Long-Term Strategies

Long-term strategies center on increasing the visibility and desirability of pharmacy as a career. Elementary school students, as well as their parents, need to know more about the field. Curricula in science and math need to be strengthened so that more students will be capable of mastering the pharmacy and prepharmacy curricula. All pharmacists need to promote the profession at every opportunity.

Summary

The pharmacy work force shortage will not be resolved unless concerted efforts are made to recruit new pharmacists and retain current staff. Managers must be creative. They must become familiar with programs that have been successful elsewhere but also must be aware of the need to tailor programs to their own institutional and employee needs. Pharmacy technicians are a key part of the work force, and their needs and capabilities must be factored into any short- or long-term strategies.

Resource

Commission on Workforce for Hospitals and Health Systems. *In Our Hands*. Chicago: American Hospital Association.; April 2002. For more information, go to www.aha.org.

Case Presentations: Creative Ways to Deal with the Pharmacy Staffing Shortage

In case presentations, three hospital pharmacy managers described how their institutions are coping with the pharmacy staff shortages. Their remarks affirmed the observations made by Ms. White, emphasizing the need to learn from others and to create programs that meet specific employee and institutional needs.