

How Nurse Leaders Can Fix Our Healthcare System

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When Sarah Simmons* moved 2 hours outside of New York City, she never imagined that finding a primary care physician in her new hometown would be a problem. Yet she was

unable to find a provider who was accepting new patients. Even with a reputable insurance plan, it was a struggle to find care. Unfortunately, Sarah is not alone.

In the United States today, we have a growing number of people who need healthcare, have more chronic illness, but simply can't find healthcare providers to serve them. With the Affordable Care Act, millions more people are insured and seeking care. So how can we provide the healthcare that they need? And how can we do this in a way that will support improved health, reduce chronic illness, and contain costs?

The nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and healthcare, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), has been exploring this question. With a mission to improve health and healthcare, RWJF is determined to create a "Culture of Health" where Americans live longer, healthier lives, and everyone has access to affordable, quality care. In an effort to achieve this goal, RWJF has invested nearly \$600 million in nursing-related causes over the past decade.¹

At the same time, AARP, the largest consumer organization in the nation, knew that our healthcare system was falling short when it came to the growing needs of increasing numbers of older adults and their family caregivers. AARP had been hearing from its members about how restrictions on nurse practitioners were hampering access to care and creating problems in obtaining a full range of services in the community. Such barriers cause older adults to seek health services using more expensive options such as hospitalizations or nursing home care. AARP recognized that to serve the needs of its 37 million members, it had to ensure that they could get the care they need, when and where they need it.

The 2 organizations came to the conclusion that nurses held the key to health system improvements and that nursing needed a greater voice in healthcare transformation. It also became clear that nurses needed to engage directly with consumers about their healthcare needs—as well as how the healthcare system could meet these needs.

CENTER TO CHAMPION NURSING IN AMERICA

Nurses are the single largest segment of the healthcare workforce.² They work at the frontlines of care, in the boardroom, and as consumer advocates. In survey after survey, nurses are named the most trusted of the healthcare professions.³ Their perspective on how things should work and how to improve quality has led to reductions in medical errors, patient injuries, and hospital readmissions.

In 2007, RWJF and AARP launched the Center to Champion Nursing in America (CCNA) to examine and promote how nursing policy issues influence consumers' access to quality care. CCNA's initial mission was to help solve the pending nursing shortage—a problem that was becoming worse due to the steady increase in the number of aging people with chronic conditions at the same time that a generation of nurses was retiring.⁴⁻⁶ The capacity of nursing schools to accept more nursing students needed to be expanded, because a bottleneck caused by a lack of nursing faculty was preventing tens of thousands of prospective students from entering nursing schools.^{7,8} Something had to be done if there were going to be enough nurses to provide care for a growing population needing care.

*Name changed to protect privacy.

AARP collaborated with more than a dozen national nursing organizations to support legislation to direct Medicare to further fund graduate nursing education. A provision to support more graduate nursing education was inserted in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), which was signed into law in March 2010; this helped to ramp up the training of more registered nurses and advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs). The nursing organizations that AARP brought together continue to collaborate on efforts to remove outdated restrictions on APRNs that exist at the federal level and in more than half of the states.

As AARP's then-chief executive officer (CEO) Bill Novelli said at CCNA's launch, "Nurses are critical to ensuring that patients get the best care possible—not just in hospitals, but in the delivery of home health care, in assisted-living facilities and in nursing homes."⁷ It wasn't long, however, before CCNA's efforts expanded to improve both access to and quality of care.

INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE'S *FUTURE OF NURSING* REPORT

Soon after the launch of the CCNA, RWJF funded the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to convene a committee of experts to develop recommendations on how nurses could help to improve health care. The committee was chaired by Donna Shalala, PhD, the longest-serving secretary for Health and Human Services under the Clinton administration. Dr. Shalala is currently president of the University of Miami, which boasts one of the largest nursing schools in the country. Committee members included nurse leaders, payers, physicians, and healthcare, policy, and quality experts.

In 2010, the IOM released "*The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*" report,⁹ which provided a blueprint for improving healthcare through nursing. The report was a game-changer. It quickly became the most widely read report in the IOM's history, and for 4 consecutive years, the *Future of Nursing* report has been the number 1 reason people visit the IOM website.

The report made 5 recommendations:

1. Remove practice barriers that prevent nurse practitioners from providing the care they are trained to provide
2. Encourage nurse leadership in board rooms and policy discussions on the future of healthcare
3. Strengthen nursing education and training and streamline pathways for nurses to obtain more advanced degrees
4. Improve workforce data collection to help predict healthcare workforce needs
5. Expand diversity in nursing to better reflect the general population and meet workforce demand

A wide variety of healthcare stakeholders took notice of the report. Healthcare executives, payers, policymakers, and of course, nurses started to discuss what these recommendations meant, not only for the future of nursing, but also for the future of healthcare.

CAMPAIGN FOR ACTION

RWJF's president and CEO, Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, decided that the IOM *Future of Nursing* report was too important to

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