

WORLD & NATION

Nursing shortage portends 'public health disaster'

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Amidst the destruction and death caused by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, health-care professionals, including nurses, worked as angels of mercy tending to those injured.

Indeed, the medical profession's overwhelming response was one of the many factors that aided both victims and on-lookers in overcoming their terrible sense of helplessness, noted Denis P. Sweeney, director of marketing and community development for St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira.

Sweeney said that St. Joseph's was on alert throughout the week because its burn unit could accommodate up to four patients from Manhattan, which lies five hours away. Although no patients had arrived as of Sept. 14, he pointed out that the dual disasters poignantly highlighted the ongoing need for medical workers. Numerous reports contained interviews with various medical workers, along with TV images of them working to save lives, and Sweeney said it may have had an impact on viewers' career ideas.

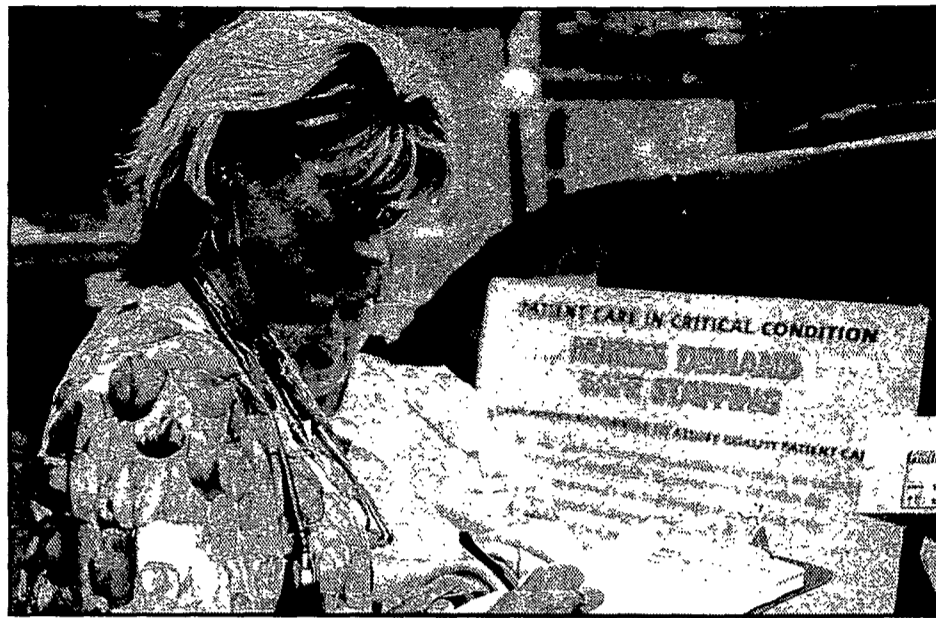
"I think, maybe out of all this, there will be an added interest by many people to get into the health-care profession," he said.

Such an interest could come none too soon, particularly for the nursing profession, which is faced with a potential acute shortage nationwide by 2010. In August, the federal government and several nursing groups reported that the average age of nurses had risen from 44.3 in 1996 to 45.2 in 2000. In New York alone, only 10 percent of all registered nurses are under age 30.

Already, various groups are reporting shortages in hospitals across the nation, leading to canceled or postponed surgeries, and a decrease in time spent by nurses on patients. The New York State Nurses Association reports that the average age of nursing faculties is 55, and that there will soon be a shortage of both nurses and nurse teachers just as the baby boom generation begins to need nursing care.

"The majority of nurses will retire in 10-15 years unless steps are taken to successfully attract students into the profession," the association's report reads.

And, the report makes this chilling con-



Karin von Voigtlander/Photo intern

Linda Maloney, a registered nurse at St. Joseph's Hospital, adds her signature to a petition sponsored by the NYS Nurses Association emphasizing the need for safe staffing at the state's hospitals in Elmira May 8. The petition ultimately raised 10,000 signatures.

clusion regarding the decline in available nurses:

"It's sounding like a crisis, and, if not addressed properly, it will be a public health disaster."

Both of the Diocese of Rochester's Catholic hospitals currently have nursing shortages. St. James Mercy Hospital in Hornell could employ up to 180 registered nurses, according to Nancy Khork, senior vice president for patient care services. However, it's currently short of that number by 15, she said.

Meanwhile, St. Joseph's is experiencing shortages in eight different employee areas, including registered nurses and licensed practical nurses, Sweeney said. This despite the fact that St. Joseph's offers the highest starting salaries for newly hired RNs in the state's Southern Tier, according to the nurses association.

Khork, Sweeney, the state nurses association and the Healthcare Association of New York State blamed these factors for creating the shortage:

- Women, who have traditionally dominated nursing, are no longer considering it a primary career choice. When she entered nursing in the late 1960s, nursing was still considered one of the top three career

choices for women, along with teaching and secretarial work, Khork said. Today, with its odd hours and demanding work, nursing "isn't as appealing to young people as some other careers are," she said.

- Veteran nurses themselves have moved out of hospitals into other careers, or to work for such employers as insurance companies and nursing schools.

- Hospitals had to cut costs as they competed for managed care contracts and suffered Medicaid and Medicare funding decreases in the 1990s. So hospitals and health-care facilities downsized nursing staffs. As the word got around that nurses were going into early retirement or simply leaving the profession, enrollment at nursing schools decreased. Hence, there are far fewer nurses available now to replace retiring nurses than there were a decade ago.

- The press focused on nurses and other health care professionals as underpaid, overworked employees who made mistakes detrimental to the care of their patients. This created a negative public image of nurses.

- In some cases, nurses felt overwhelmed by a more demanding public that had become more knowledgeable about health care, and less forgiving of mistakes. In oth-

er cases, older nurses failed to nurture younger ones, causing some to leave the profession out of discouragement.

- A lack of legislative protection for whistleblowers who point out unsafe situations in health-care facilities makes it difficult for some nurses to come forward with complaints about their situations.

And what may be worst of all, according to Sweeney, is the mound of paperwork that nurses must climb each day in order to satisfy various rules and regulations. With a chuckle, he pointed out that recently St. Joseph's experienced a two-hour power outage that seemed to be a blessing in disguise for the staff. With no computers beckoning them, nurses and other workers spent a little extra time with patients, time that otherwise would have normally been consumed keeping up with paperwork.

"Folks get into this career because they wanted to help patients, not so much push paper," he said.

A Republican task force from the state legislature concluded that the shortage could be addressed through the following measures, released to the press in August.

- Restrict mandatory overtime to emergencies.
- Establish safe staffing guidelines.
- Fund scholarships and stipends for nursing students.
- Enhance wages.
- Create advertising campaigns to attract young people into nursing.

On that final note, both St. Joseph's and St. James have put together newspaper ad campaigns featuring nurses currently employed by their facilities who are pictured next to quotes describing why they love their jobs. Both hospitals have also stepped up efforts to have veteran nurses mentor or work closely with younger ones.

And everyone agrees that the more benefits and pay nurses receive, the better the chances the profession will regain its prominence as a career path for young people. In the end, however, hospitals must rely on people choosing nursing for more than just the material rewards, Sweeney said.

"This the type of career that requires working weekends, nights, holidays," he said. "It takes a special individual. It's a profession, but it's also part of their nature."

Parishes, schools, agencies step forward to aid victims

Parishioners throughout the diocese responded by praying, offering expertise, and donating blood and money in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. Specific projects, and ways that parishes, schools and other organizations might help, include:

- Students at St. Charles Borromeo School, Greece, planned to begin "Nickels

and Dime for Our Nation" Sept. 17.

- Students at Immaculate Conception School in Ithaca were making cards to send to hospitals in New York. Some upper-grade students were selling pictures of the former New York skyline to raise money for the Red Cross.

- Parishes including St. Casimir/St. Charles Borromeo in Elmira and Elmira

Heights, St. Anthony's in Groton and Mother of Sorrows Parish in Greece planned special collections for disaster relief, as were Rochester's Holy Family School students and staff.

- Students of St. Mary School, Canandaigua, were collecting donations and selling candy to raise money for the Red Cross and Catholic Charities.

- St. Mary School students in Dansville planned to donate revenue from N.U.T. Day, when they purchase a coupon for 50 cents to allow them to dress down for the day.

- Our Mother of Sorrows' youth group changed the scope of a fundraiser to aid disaster victims.

Rob Layer, youth minister, said that the group's bread sale, held after each weekend Mass Sept. 16-17, was originally planned to defray costs for youths attending the National Catholic Youth Conference this December. Instead, Layer suggested that the money go toward the American Red Cross disaster relief fund.

Youth-group members, he said, responded "instantaneously" in agreement. As a result, the Mother of Sorrows teens will shoulder larger out-of-pocket expenses to attend the national convention. They scored big with their fundraiser, netting more than \$1,900.

"The kids figured Red Cross needs the money more than they do," Layer said.

- Catholic Charities USA is accepting money to help with disaster relief at P.O. Box 25168, Alexandria, VA 22313-9788. It also has been taking donations online at www.catholiccharitiesusa.org, and by phone at 800/919-9338. Relief supplies were not being accepted.

- The Greater Rochester Community of Churches was encouraging people to join in a letter-writing campaign led by Kathryn Howard and her 12-year-old daughter, Maura Steward. The two did a similar project in response to the Oklahoma City bombing. They urged writing personal letters to peers, for example, to a firefighter, teacher, pastor, mother or father. Letters will be collected in libraries, churches and other places. Howard will collect them in bunches and may be reached by calling 716/234-9414 or by e-mail at khatn@aol.com. The Federal Emergency Management Agency offered to help have the letters distributed in New York City, Washington and Pittsburgh, according to GRCC.

- The Food Bank of the Southern Tier, in partnership with America's Second Harvest, was coordinating food and water supplies for relief workers and feeding centers. FEMA recommended cash, rather than in-kind, donations be made. Checks may be written to the Food Bank of the Southern Tier, 945 County Route 64, Elmira, N.Y., 14903. To make a donation, people may also log onto secondharvest.org.

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