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EDITORIAL

For Want of a Nurse

The United States spent most of its history enjoying the fruits of the theory that the only professions suitable for respectable women were nursing and teaching. As a result, the schools and hospitals were filled with highly qualified people working for extremely low wages. Then women's liberation arrived, and with it, a drastic shortage of teachers and nurses.

The medical needs of an aging population make the nursing situation seem particularly stark. With the coming retirement of the last generation of women who chose nursing simply because they didn't want to teach, things are likely to get only worse. The average age of registered nurses now is estimated at 47 and climbing.

As Celia Dugger reported last week in *The Times*, American hospitals are looking overseas to solve some of the current nursing shortage, eliciting worried responses from African and Asian countries that worry about losing their own desperately needed medical professionals. In the Philippines, most of the government doctors have enrolled in nursing training in hopes of being permitted to come to the United States to work.

The idea of the richest country in the world skimming the scant cream off the health care staffs of poor countries is disturbing. No one wants to close the gates to a skilled population of people. This page, which has argued that unskilled illegal immigrants should be given a path to potential citizenship, is not going to say that nurses from the Philippines should receive less favored treatment. But it is incumbent on the United States to start trying to solve this problem on its own.

One of the first and most obvious fixes is increased government spending on nursing education — particularly the training of professors of nursing. The Nurse Education Loan Repayment Program, which provides financial aid to students who agree to work after graduation in places that have a critical shortage of nurses, was able to pay for fewer than 20 percent of the applicants in 2005. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing reported that more than 30,000 qualified students were not admitted last year because of a lack of space and faculty.

Although salaries have been rising, nursing groups say that one of the chief complaints of their members is low pay. But like doctors and other medical practitioners, they also report dropping job satisfaction because of the pressures of modern cost-driven medical care. Their dissatisfactions mirror those of today's patients: too few medical workers serving too many very sick people. And none of those things are going to be solved on the cheap.

Back in the 19th century, the reformer and physician William Alcott envisioned an early version of a

national health system. He proposed that as many women as possible should be trained as nurses so all Americans could benefit from free medical care. The idea that the nurses would want to be paid did not seem to occur to Alcott. Even today, the country does not seem to have quite adjusted to the idea.

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