

LIGHTENING THE FINANCIAL LOAD

Changes to Ontario's Nursing Education Initiative grant criteria mean more nurses will benefit. BY MELISSA DI COSTANZO

Five years ago, Kimberly Jones was about to walk away from a job she loved. The nurse and single mother of three had just been offered a position as a site administrative manager at Hamilton Health Sciences (HHS). But there was a hitch: Jones, who graduated in 1995 from Mohawk College's three-year nursing diploma program, needed a baccalaureate degree to stay in her new role.

She applied and was accepted to Australia's Charles Sturt University online nursing program, which enabled her to study while working, and still spend time with her children. But the annual tuition was staggering: \$10,000.

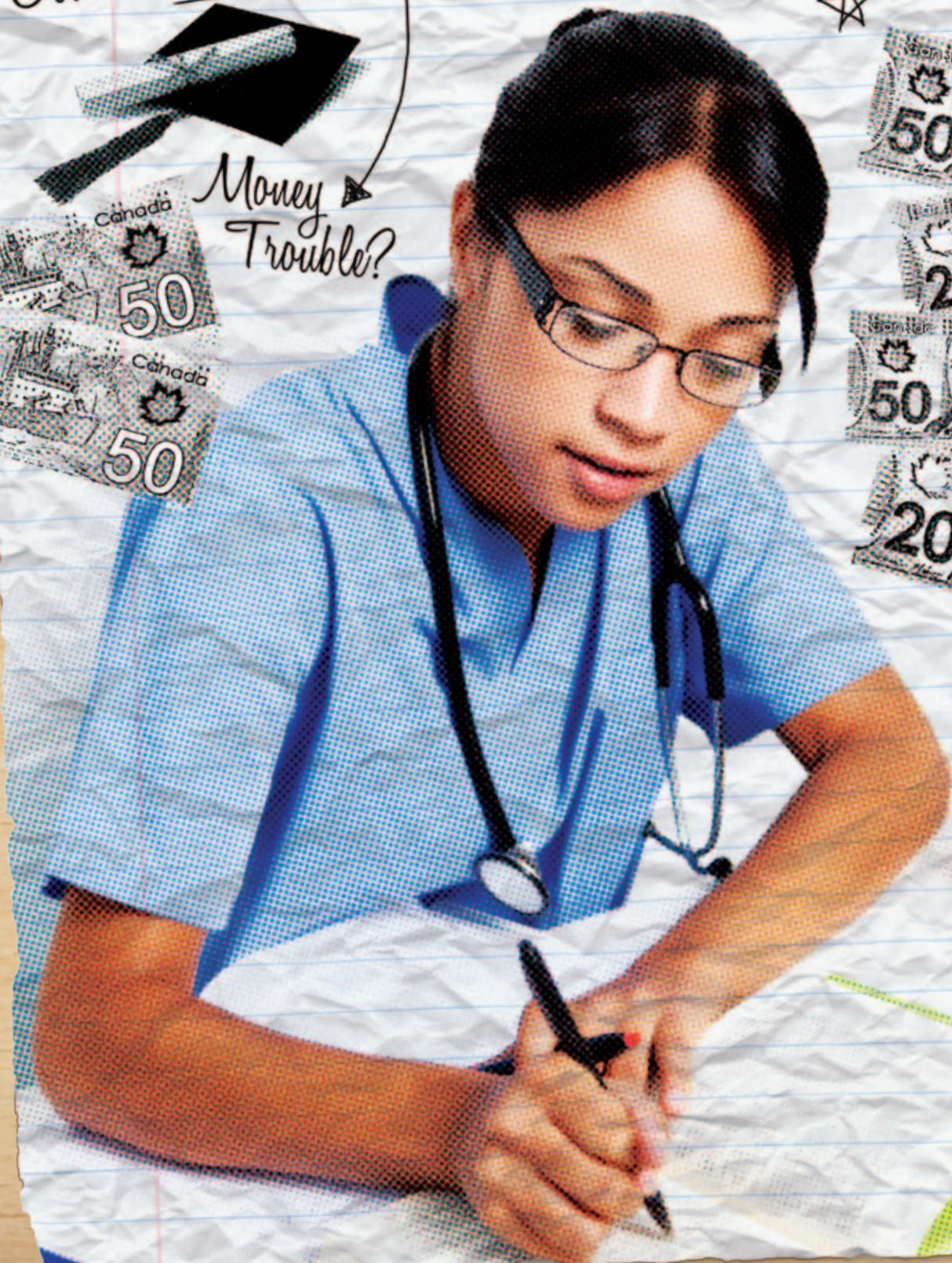
Jones faced other financial pressures that made the pursuit of education difficult. She had just paid \$20,000 for orthodontic work for her kids. A mortgage and the cost of food and babysitting also ate away at her income. To make ends meet, she picked up various part-time jobs to supplement her new, part-time role as administrative manager. In addition to teaching at Mohawk College, she worked in a hospice, the ER, and psychiatry a few times a month. Facing a stack of bills, Jones found herself thinking about giving up on her degree. "I thought: 'I'm totally throwing in the towel,'" she recalls. "Every semester, I had anxiety that was never ending. (I kept thinking) 'How can I come up with the money?'"

Goal = Graduation

☆ NEI = Help!
☆



Money
Trouble?



Then a nursing colleague reminded Jones of Ontario's Nursing Education Initiative (NEI), a provincial grant that RNs and RPNs can access to help offset educational and training costs. She had applied for NEI in 2002 to help pay for a management and leadership course. Five years later, she filled out an online application, and received \$1,500, the maximum annual amount nurses can receive through the program. Though she admits balancing the books continued to be a challenge, Jones says NEI was her saving grace. If her studies equated to two years of struggling financially, Jones says she may have quit. "RNAO has been probably one of the biggest influences on my nursing career, from a financial and professional standpoint," she says. "I couldn't have done it without (NEI)."

Encouraged by the support, Jones stuck with her dream and obtained her BScN in 2009. The following January, she signed up for the Charles Sturt University master's program. She's enrolled in two courses each year for the last three years, and

How it works

Due to high demand, criteria for NEI funding have changed. Applications are reviewed and given a score out of 100 based on points in six areas: previous NEI funding; employment sector; predominant clinical area of practice; employment status; type of education/training; and institute classification. A ranking of 70 means 70 per cent of the maximum amount (\$1,500) will be funded, with some exceptions. This method ensures more nurses are reimbursed, and is more equitable than the ranking system used in the past, which saw some applicants receive full grants while others received none.

Since its inception, over \$60-million has been doled out to nurses across the province. NEI has received more than 139,000 applications, and more than 100,000 courses have been approved for funding. Thousands of nurses have accessed NEI to help them achieve professional goals, boost their knowledge and skills to help them provide better patient care, or to mentor the next generation of nurses.

For Anne Moulton, the program helped to accomplish all three.

Moulton, a nurse educator in the hemodialysis program at St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton, received grants to put towards her undergraduate degree. She's since achieved her master's and has embarked on her next educational chapter: a PhD she intends to complete by 2015. This educational journey was a personal commitment, she says, adding she never expected anyone else to support her financially.

She is thrilled younger nurses can reap the positive spinoff from the education she is able to fund through the initiative. "My career is coming closer to an end, and I

want to ensure (I'm) as educated as possible, so I can mentor new nurses," she explains. She's doing just that at work and through McMaster University, where, for the past two years, she's tutored fourth-year undergraduate students during their clinical placements at St. Joseph's.

One of her students recently recognized Moulton's drive to inspire other nurses to pursue professional development, penning a letter that read, in part: "The goals that you set for yourself within your career and the determination that you consistently show in order to achieve them are so inspiring to me."

Her students' gratitude "makes it all worthwhile," says Moulton, who acknowledges NEI played a large role in helping her to get to where she is today. "It has made a huge difference, and I'm very appreciative of it." **RN**

NEI at a Glance

- 1 Funding is capped at \$1,500/applicant annually
- 2 Nurses who have never received funding will be given priority
- 3 Reimbursement is limited
- 4 Online applications (www.RNAO.ca/NEI) are strongly encouraged
- 5 All nurses registered with CNO can apply.
- 6 Faxed applications are not accepted
- 7 Applications must be received no more than 90 days after course completion
- 8 A record \$5.6 million was given out in 2007, the highest annual tally to date
- 9 The highest number of applications from RNs sits at 13,000 in 2004

NEI has reimbursed her fees because the priorities she's noted in her applications have matched well with the priorities set out by the government.

Nurses can apply year after year, but funding is limited, explains Louis-Charles Lavellee, Director of Information Management and Technology at RNAO. Lavellee is in charge of administering NEI on behalf of the provincial government.

The program launched 14 years ago, when the Ministry of Health announced a nurse training and education fund in response to a 1999 Ontario Nursing Task Force report, *Good Nursing, Good Health: An Investment for the 21st Century*. The task force behind the report, which included then-RNAO president Judith Shamian, urged the ministry to develop a "comprehensive method of funding nursing services." Eight months ahead of the recommended deadline of November 1999, RNAO and the Registered Practical Nurses' Association of Ontario (RPNAO) began accepting application forms.

Interested in finding out more about this program? Visit www.RNAO.ca/NEI

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