

## Canada needs to catch up on full-time nursing front



**The International Council of Nurses' (ICN) 23rd Quadrennial Congress, held in May in Taiwan, was a magnificent experience. It allowed us to learn from one another**

and to present on the many initiatives RNAO is leading: from clinical and healthy work environments best practice guidelines to advanced clinical fellowships to our unforgettable experience with SARS.

The congress also opened our eyes to an important reality: Ontario's over-reliance on part-time and casual nursing employment is mainly a Canadian phenomenon. What is most remarkable about attending international events is the opportunity to compare the global experiences of nurses. This year we learned:

- In most other countries, those who work part-time or casual (there are very few of the latter) choose to do so (this used to be the case in Canada until the mid 1980s).
- Many countries, such as Japan and Thailand, have workforces in which close to 100 per cent of RNs work full time. Employers and nurses report no difficulties with this.
- The U.S. aggressively markets a 72 per cent full-time RN employment rate. This stands in sharp contrast to Canada's 55 per cent rate, and threatens an exodus of our new graduates unless we immediately and fully open our doors to meet their desire for full-time work (Andrea Baumann reported in 2004 that 79.3 % of new grads want full-time work).

It felt good to say at ICN that Ontario is making progress. The gloom-and-doom

realities of the 1990s, which forced thousands of RNs into casual and part-time work and pushed full-time employment down to 50 per cent in 1998, seems to be behind us.

RNAO reported at ICN that improvements in full-time work did not happen without intense lobbying that put the issue front and center on the policy agenda. We felt proud to say that today, many – if not most – employers, politicians, the media, and the public understand and support the importance of full-time employment for RNs.

What lessons have we learned? It takes years – in this case, five – to move an agenda from our books to government policy. Since 1998, RNAO has called on governments and employers to create a nursing workforce in which 70 per cent of all RNs work full time. The Liberal party committed itself to that goal during the 2003 election campaign, and early in its mandate the McGuinty government introduced policies to increase full-time nursing employment. We are now seeing progress – 59 per cent of Ontario RNs work full time – but if government is to accomplish its (and RNAO's) goal, it must revitalize its commitment and target more funding to it.

That's what the results of RNAO's survey of RNs and employers indicate. *The 70 per cent solution: A progress report on increasing full-time employment for Ontario RNs*, released June 14, shows progress in increasing full-time employment and stresses the urgent need to accelerate targeted investment in full-time positions. It highlights the gap between high RN desire for full-time work and low employment opportunities. The survey indicates that if all

RNs got their preferred employment status, 64.5 % would have full time work. And, if working conditions were to improve, many more RNs would move to full time, potentially reaching 76 per cent full-time employment within the RN workforce.

The report includes recommendations for government and employers: increased targeted funding for full-time RN positions; stringent conditions attached to that funding in all sectors; accelerate delivery of funding to create the 8,000 new nursing positions the government promised by 2007; and working schedules that accommodate the unique needs of senior and novice nurses.

For the few who remain skeptical, this survey is instructive. There are more RNs who want full-time positions than there are full-time positions available, so let's open the doors. Data (and common sense) support the link between full-time employment and improved patient/client outcomes, efficient RN utilization and system cost effectiveness, enhanced organizational commitment, and successful recruitment and retention of RNs.

Have we heard nurses saying they can't find part-time or casual work? RNAO has not. Have we heard from frustrated nurses who can't find full-time work? RNAO has taken many calls from frustrated RNs, and one of those was Victoria Wagner, a nurse you'll meet in our cover story. After a stint in the U.S. and a year's search for full-time work, she just landed a permanent, full-time position at St. Michael's Hospital. Congratulations!

Let's continue to move on the right track, but let's pick up the pace. Together we can reach our target – 70 per cent full-time – and become a magnet province for RNs!

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