

A Conversation with Nursing Expert Rebecca M. Patton

BY LEAH INGRAM

Before becoming president of the American Nurses Association (ANA), which represents the nation's 2.9 million registered nurses, Rebecca M. Patton, MSN, R.N., CNOR, worked as an operating-room (OR) nurse in Cleveland. Patton's mother, an emergency-room nurse, inspired her to pursue the profession. "Through my mother's eyes, I saw how nurses make a difference," recalls Patton. Despite the awe-inspiring reasons that have drawn Patton and many others to nursing over the years, the United States is facing a critical shortage of nurses. We recently spoke to Patton about the reasons for that shortage and how people can find out more about nursing.



Q: Why is there a shortage of nurses?

A: Part of the reason there is a shortage is we now have this huge group of baby boomer-age nurses who are retiring. But I think the work environment is the biggest reason for this shortage. Nursing is a physically demanding job. The average staff nurse, in an eight-hour shift, moves 1.8 tons. That's a lot of weight to move around. What's frustrating is that there are solutions to this problem—portable lifts, for example, have existed for years, yet hospitals here in the United States have not purchased them. Think about it this way: When you go to Home Depot, you don't see a worker picking up a 100-pound bag of concrete. The store uses equipment to do that. Yet nurses, by themselves, move 100-pound patients all the time.

Q: What kind of education does a person need to become a registered nurse?

A: There are two-year programs for

an associate degree, three-year programs for a diploma and four-year programs for a baccalaureate degree, a bachelor of science in nursing. Then, to be licensed as a registered nurse, you have to pass a state licensing exam. The more education a nurse has, the better the patient outcome. We are trying to get more nurses educated at that four-year level.

Q: What exactly do nurses do on a day-to-day basis?

A: It depends on what kind of nurse you are. A school nurse does early assessments on kids and focuses on wellness and prevention. An OR nurse assists with surgery. A bedside, hospital nurse manages a patient's health-care needs.

Q: What inspires people to become nurses?

A: It's a very rewarding job. If you can tolerate the physical demands and the mental challenges, it's probably one of the most rewarding things that you

can do. When I was a nurse in the OR, there was nothing more satisfying than staying with a child while he was going to sleep for surgery and seeing in his eyes the trust he had that you wouldn't harm him, and that he would wake up and be reunited with his parents. You can't buy that feeling.

Q: What kind of person makes a great nurse?

A: Someone who is committed to lifelong learning, can manage and handle multiple activities at once, knows how to be articulate and a good listener and can advocate for a patient's well-being.

Q: Where can readers learn more about becoming a nurse?

A: I would recommend the ANA's website, nursingworld.org. Not only does it offer information on the mechanics of getting into nursing school, but it will show you a glimpse of what it's like to walk in a nurse's shoes. ●