



An Ageing Nursing Workforce

Fact Sheet

By 2020 there will be more than one billion people aged 60 years and older in the world.¹ This demographic trend has many implications, both for the demand for care and the demand and availability of carers. It will affect all segments of society.

In relation to effective workforce policies, attention and reference to ageing of the workforce have increased markedly in the last decade. For example, in the European Union, concerns about the sustainability of pensions, economic growth and the future labour supply have stimulated a range of policy processes and recommendations to promote the health and working capacity of workers as they age; to develop the skills and employability of older workers; to examine raising the pension age; and to provide suitable working conditions as well as employment opportunities for an ageing workforce.²

Within nursing, the situation in many industrialised countries is that the nursing workforce is ageing. Over the next 10 to 15 years these countries will experience a large exodus of nurses from their workforce as nurses retire just at a time when demand for nursing and health care is on the rise; one of the reasons being the growth in the older population.

This trend, if left unaddressed, is set to deepen the current shortage of employed nurses, particularly in countries where there is a shortfall of new nurses entering the labour market. It will also have a knock on effect on developing countries where the age profile may be very different but where aggressive international recruitment efforts may drain the supply of nurses in active practice.

Facts, figures and trends

The average age of the nurse in many countries exceeds 40. See the table below.

Average age of an employed nurse ^{3,4}	Average age of retirement by law ^{5,6}
Canada - 44.6	Canada - 65
Denmark - 43.8	Denmark - 65
Iceland - 44	Iceland - 67
Ireland - 41.4	Ireland - 65
Germany - 39.4	Germany - 65
Japan - 37.9	Japan - 60
New Zealand - 44	New Zealand - 60**
Singapore - 35	Singapore - 62
Thailand - 41	Thailand - 60
United Kingdom - 42	United Kingdom - 65
United States - 46.8*	United States - N/A

* Average age of *all* RNs in the USA not just employed.

** Average retirement age of RNs in practice only.

N/A= Not applicable.

- The legal age of retirement is not necessarily the average age at which a nurse will leave the workforce. For instance, in Canada, Ireland and Singapore the average age of retirement “in practice” is 60 while, in Iceland, the average age is 64 – several years below the legal retirement age.^{7 8}
- In the United Kingdom (UK), an estimated 180,000 nurses will reach retirement age over the next decade.⁹
- By 2010 predictions indicate that 40 percent of nurses in the United States (USA) will be over 50 years of age.¹⁰ A survey of 1000 nurses (mostly managers) indicates over 55 percent of respondents plan to retire between 2011 and 2020.¹¹
- Recent figures from Canada reveal that registered nurses between age 50 and 54 years make up 17 percent of the workforce, compared to 11 percent in 1994.¹²
- In some countries (e.g. USA and Ghana) ageing is affecting the nursing faculty providing education and training to the next generation of nurses.¹³ For instance, a wave of faculty retirements is predicted across the USA over the next 10 years¹⁴ and, if left unaddressed, will increasingly put restrictions on enrolments into nursing programmes.
- There is a trend in some countries, such as the UK and USA, of increasing numbers of people entering the profession at an older age (e.g. late twenties and early thirties). As a result, projections indicate that by 2010 the USA will have more nurses in their fifties than in any other age group.¹⁵

- There have been cases where nurses have taken industrial action because their right to early retirement has been challenged. For instance, prior to 1999, nurses in Panama had the right to early retirement at the age of 50, with benefits amounting to the last yearly income – the same percentage that is given to all public employees (e.g. fireman, clerks, sanitation, etc.). However, in 1999 the law was changed and nurses must now work until age 57 and then only receive a percentage of their last yearly income. In other words their acquired rights have been taken away and their pension benefits cut.
- A representative of the Zambian Ministry of Health recently reported that strategies to address the country's nursing shortage will include extending the retirement age by 10 years, while new graduate nurses are unable to find employment due to frozen positions and no-growth financial policies.¹⁶
- Results from a study of 290 health care facilities in the USA found that, while most administrators were aware of the ageing workforce and desired to retain their older nurses, only 6 percent had policies in place to address the needs of older nurses. Eighty-seven (87) percent had no immediate plans to address the ageing nursing workforce issue.¹⁷
- In the USA, nursing ranks third among the top 10 most injury-prone jobs.¹⁸ Research indicates that nurses (14.7%) experience a higher incidence of back pain per year than non-nurses (11.5%), and that occurrence increases with age.¹⁹
- In a survey of 308 nurses over the age of 50, close to one-quarter reported having experienced a job-related injury within the past five years, and over one third suffered from health problems related to the job (e.g. back pain, anxiety, depression, etc).²⁰
- Job re-design and modifications in the work environment are being introduced in a number of countries (e.g. Canada, USA). For instance, limiting heavy workloads, redesigning patient handling methods to reduce back injuries, and allowing greater flexibility in scheduling enable experienced nurses to reduce the physical demands of nursing care while increasing their role as mentors and clinical instructors.
- A survey of nurses and doctors in Australia reported that the three most important factors in determining retirement behaviour were anticipated income on retirement, availability of flexible hours, and health status.²¹

Strategies to attract and retain older, experienced nurses

Older nurses are a rich human resource pool. In many countries, they represent the fastest growing segment of the nursing workforce. Their premature or forced exit from the workforce and/or reduction in working hours means a loss of much needed and experienced nurses to care for patients. When they retire, their knowledge, wisdom and clinical expertise are lost, as is their contribution to training and mentoring the next generation of nurses. Tailoring employment strategies to this group is important to their retention. The literature suggests that older, more experienced nurses are more likely to extend their work life when the following conditions exist:

- Supportive and flexible work arrangements and practices (e.g. modified workloads, flexible scheduling options, reduction in hours of work, etc.).
- An organisational culture that promotes participation in decision-making and autonomy over practice.
- Work recognition, encouragement and positive feedback from supervisors.
- Ergonomically friendly, safe and effective work environments.
- Access to professional development activities that target the needs of experienced nurses.^{22, 23, 24}

ICN/ICHRN actions

The International Council of Nurses and its International Centre for Human Resources in Nursing:

- Advocate/campaign for positive practice environments for all health professionals across all age groups, to end age related discrimination and improve working conditions.
- Publish scholarly material on managing the multi-generational nursing workforce and supervising and mentoring this workforce in order to inform and improve policy and practice in this area.
- Collect, collate, analyze and disseminate data on the nursing workforce (e.g. ICN nursing workforce profiles) in order to better assess the profile of nurses in different countries, regions and sectors.
- Raise awareness through position statements and at meetings and other forums on the specific issues facing the older nurse, including the promotion of a “living” pension.
- Develop and promote nursing human resource management competencies in order to improve the abilities of managers to develop and implement HR policies that effectively address the needs of an ageing nursing workforce.
- Evaluate and disseminate good HR management practice in this area, to lead to improvements in policy. This is accomplished through presentations at meetings and other forums and through the ICN-ICHRN website and published case studies.

- Present and discuss research and analysis of age related issues at international conferences, congresses and regional forums.
- By publishing scholarly material and making information available via the ICN-ICHRN website to support national nurses associations in their efforts to promote effective policies for an ageing nursing workforce.
- Discuss job redesign, pension benefits, and retention strategies particularly relevant for an ageing nursing workforce during Workforce Forum meetings.

For further information, please contact: ichrn@secretariat.org

The International Council of Nurses is a federation of 129 national nurses' associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses for nurses, ICN is the international voice of nursing and works to ensure quality care for all and sound health policies globally.

The International Centre for Human Resources in Nursing was established in 2006 by the International Council of Nurses and its premier foundation the Florence Nightingale International Foundation. The Centre is dedicated to strengthening the nursing workforce globally through the development, ongoing monitoring and dissemination of comprehensive information and tools on nursing human resources policy, management, research and practice.

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