

Balancing work and studies: another factor complicating nursing shortages

Many questions have been raised of late about university nursing programs, as noted at the press conference held by the OIIQ Youth Committee in March and in the brief by the Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing. What is happening with training for future nurses?

There is a Radio-Canada television program called *Le monde de Charlotte*, featuring a nurse, a mother in her early forties, who is also attending school. This is such a common situation among nurses that it raises no eyebrows. In the 1990s, at least 20% of practising nurses (one in five) said that they were attending university at the same time. The rate is considerably higher among young nurses—almost one in three (32%).

A warning from the OIIQ Youth Committee

On March 24, the Youth Committee spoke out publicly about how difficult it is to juggle work and studies, not to mention all the challenges involved in getting a start in the profession, such as the fact that young nurses are forced to leave regions where there are no jobs for them.

The Committee called on the government to ensure that the DCS-Bac

program is implemented as promised to the students enrolled in it. More specifically, the Committee members said that they were worried about the question of university admission and whether insufficient funding would lead to quotas being applied. Barring young people from university studies not only puts obstacles in their career paths, but also means that they have to live on the edge, financially speaking, that much longer and complicates their personal and family situations. In the face of all these difficulties, some might even be tempted to give up on the profession.

Jérôme Gauvin-Lepage, Vice-Chair of the Youth Committee, spoke about his own experience: after completing his DCS, he went on to earn his baccalaureate in nursing in three years of full-time study, working full time in the summer and two or three days a week during the school year, thanks to an understanding employer. In his opinion, the DCS-Bac is an extraordi-

nary opportunity for new DCS graduates, in that it allows them to complete a nursing degree in two years instead of three.

Jérôme's case is far from typical, however. Our statistics show that in the 1990s, 30% of young people who held a DCS when they obtained their nursing permits finally earned their baccalaureates seven years later, while another 5% took up to 20 years to finish. Many others simply dropped out along the way. According to statistics from the Quebec Department of Education, the success rate for full-time students is much higher than for their part-time counterparts—after 10 years, 75% of full-time cohorts have obtained their baccalaureate, as compared with just 40% for part-time students.

What does all this mean? That it's natural for young people to have a rough time of it? This situation has been with us for decades, but the context has now changed completely, and



Photo Marcel La Haye

we would be wrong to see the difficulties facing young people as something normal. The DCS-Bac was to be a solution to the undue delays in earning university degrees but, more than that, was intended to ensure that there were enough nurses with university degrees on the labour market.

There are many questions of late about university nursing programs. The Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN), Quebec Region, presented a brief on March 25 to the parliamentary commission on the quality, accessibility and funding of Quebec universities, describing all the challenges to be met by training programs, in particular the need to replace retiring nursing professors and teachers, the investment required in laboratories, the rising number of students, the development of new programs such as advanced practice, and the supervision of clinical training. University under-funding has an impact on different programs, in particular nursing, where the number of students has risen substantially.

Obviously, the Order supports the recommendations of the brief by directors and deans. It is high time that university nursing programs in Quebec received adequate funding.

But what about young people's anger and disappointment? Can we expect to see the number of nurses decline over the coming years? Given the current shortage of nurses, it certainly seems that the government is taking a cavalier approach, throwing oil on the fire and exacerbating an extremely precarious situation.

A foreseeable crisis

As far back as June 16, 2003, the Order sent Mr. Couillard a statistical report on the shortage of nurses with university training—a situation that is becoming extremely critical, because the most-educated nurses are also the oldest, and hence the first ones to retire. For example, 681 nurse educators are over age 50! The Order considers that at least 1,500 nurses must earn their baccalaureates every year to replace all the university-educated nurses who will be retiring, and to meet specific needs in certain clinical sectors. At present these numbers stand at barely 700 a year.

The shortage of nurses with university training could have serious consequences, for it places the whole leadership of the profession at risk, and with it nurses' ability to cope with all the challenges now emerging in the healthcare system.

We managed to attract a large number of young people into the DCS-Bac program, as it was seen as an attractive deal for those considering nursing careers. According to a study by the Department of Education, close to 30% of such students said that they had enrolled to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the program—automatic admission to university. Imagine their disappointment if this proves not to be the case!

On March 13, the headline in *Le Nouvelliste*, in Trois-Rivières, proclaimed that people at regional CEGEPs were furious because last-minute quotas had been applied to the DCS-Bac program at UQTR. Students

were calling it false advertising and complaining about the impact on their financial situations. One of them, the article noted, had signed a lease so that she could study in Trois-Rivières.

For months now, we have been pressing the Departments of Health and Social Services and Education to do whatever is necessary to accommodate all the CEGEP graduates wishing to complete their baccalaureates. Otherwise there is a risk of driving potential CEGEP students away and finding it impossible to replace university-trained nurses as they retire. I would add another possible result: disheartening and discouraging the younger generation. Given that 2,500 nurses are retiring every year, young people embarking on their careers will not have the same support network that earlier generations enjoyed. The constant instability created as waves of nurses retire and are replaced will demand great personal and professional commitment. Moreover, there will be a tremendous need for specialized expertise. Is it too much to ask, to be allowed to study for two more years and consolidate one's knowledge?

We should be proud of our Youth Committee and all the young people in our profession who are prepared to take over from us, but who have also understood that juggling work and studies may well become an impossible task. We should give them our full and vocal support. 📍

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