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Staffing

Avoiding Culture Clash

By Pamela Mills-Senn

As the number of foreign-born nurses climbs, executives look for ways to bridge cultural gap

Just like the nation as a whole, America's hospitals are an ever-expanding mixing bowl of cultures and ethnicities. Need proof? Look no further than your nursing staff. It's estimated that foreign-born nurses make up 12 percent of the workforce, up from 9 percent in the mid-1990s.

With the demand for nurses growing, that number is likely to climb even higher. As a result, hospital executives face a critical personnel challenge: integrating foreign-born nurses into the workplace. Problems most typically arise around cultural differences, which influence people's beliefs and expectations, says Georgianna Donadio, director, New England School of Whole Health Education, Wellesley, Mass., a provider of continuing education for nurses.

"Culture impacts how nurses communicate with each other. For example, in many cultures, keeping eyes downcast is a sign of respect. In the U.S., this can make it seem like the person is hiding something," Donadio explains. "Some cultures are open, some are reticent. What one person says, or how they behave, in one culture doesn't necessarily translate to another, and it's important people [recognize] this. Otherwise, there can be misunderstandings and conflict."

There are additional issues, says Shawn Feinstein, CEO of Absolut Global Healthcare, a Boca Raton, Fla., health care recruiting firm. Although overseas hires generally have good command of English, they're often unfamiliar with the advanced technology found in U.S. hospitals, and with hospital protocols. Consequently, more training is needed to help them assimilate. This isn't just a critical staff issue, she says, but a critical patient care one as well.

Laura Fortin, chief nursing executive and chief operating officer of Christus St. Joseph Hospital in Houston agrees. Christus hires "a lot" of foreign-born nurses, about 95 percent of which are from the Philippines.

"We have to acculturate them to the hospital--it's not unusual for nurses from the Philippines to never have worked in a hospital--and to the community," Fortin says. "The program we have in place minimizes the cultural conflict that we may otherwise experience."

They rely on their veteran Filipino nurses, who serve on a volunteer welcome committee, to buddy with the new hires and show them the ropes both inside and outside of the hospital. New arrivals and their families are also housed on the hospital campus for two months, free of charge.

"The U.S.-born staff has no problem acculturating to the Filipino nurses; we've had them on staff for so long. But if we didn't have something in place for the [new nurses] they'd really struggle, and I suspect some of them would go home," Fortin says. "Given all that's required to get them here, this would be unfortunate."

Christus is developing programs to educate staff about diversity issues overall, having done a yearlong study last summer.

"We're focusing on this at the systems level," Fortin says. "We feel you have to understand staff diversity before you can understand patient diversity."

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