## Adding More Seats in university nursing programs is no solution to the "crisis in nursing staffing":

In his article in the Telegraph Journal on Friday, October 18, 2019, Michael Robinson reveals that prior to the budget cuts in the university nursing faculties, the UNB had pitched the province with an idea it believed would solve the nursing shortage crisis. He examined a flurry of attempts by the UNB administration to convince government that the solution to the nursing staffing crisis was to add a large investment to expanding faculty and class size in the RN programs at UNB.

In the exchanges of emails, it was revealed that the university proposed major expansion in enrollment levels with a cost estimate of \$14,000 per student as the solution to graduating more nurses qualified to write the registration examinations. This proposal was to take the number of seats from 488 to 800 by 2025/26 adding significant increase in budget in addition to what had been approved in 2005/6 for the expansion of class size.

Meanwhile, according to subsequent reports, government had learned that the increases approved in 2005/6 had not resulted in the agreed-upon increases in class size. So to the outside observer, it looks like the first investment failed to yield results and the university was looking for an increased investment to accomplish what the first investment was intended to do!

Government was wise in not responding to this offer, frankly, for it represents no solution to the real issues in staffing of hospitals and other health facilities at all. And if the earlier targeted investments failed to yield the intended results, why would one think that investing more millions of tax dollars would have a different result.

Increasing class size is critical but to what level and based on what evidence? In short, taken as a standalone strategy, this would be poor public policy.

The issues of nursing staffing go well beyond the numbers of nurses being graduated from universities; that is the easy part, if not the most costly. Other issues must be identified, analyzed, with action taken to resolve them. Many of these issues were identified in a commentary in August responding to the government's release of its Nursing Resource Strategy in July 2019.

Responsible executives must start with a true assessment of the effective deployment of those valuable RN skills. Do the highly trained professional RNs spend significant portions of time in non-professional activity? Years ago, at the time regionalization of hospitals, a consultant study showed that only \$0.13 of every dollar spent by hospitals went to direct care; much of the balance, in addition to materials, laundry and such, was what was referred to as "waiting".... for a lab test, for delivery of goods, for a room to be cleaned and so on.

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The issue of what proportion of nursing work could and should be performed by LPNs and other care staff always causes rancor when introduced but it needs to be a serious element of real analysis.

Complexity of Caseload is yet another major factor. The deployment of health care personnel needs to be aligned with solid measures of caseload which help to allow serious assessment of levels of care required in any given workplace.

The issue of absenteeism and the inability of the system to effectively manage it were also referenced in an earlier commentary. While much absenteeism may be used for very legitimate health reasons, it is well understood that absenteeism must be managed diligently by supervisors. Reasonable efforts to effectively manage employee issues are often compromised when supervisory staff is also members of the same union.

Workplace culture is yet another element of major proportions. For professional nurses, the workplace should be highly motivating environment, one in which professionals work together toward common goals and all staff are treated as professionals and learn to enjoy their work. High turnover, high workplace incidents, and high absenteeism are symptoms of serious culture problems. Indeed, these have long ago been recognized in leadership training documents as symptoms of organizational malaise.

So while graduating adequate numbers of persons to fill vacancies is critical, a positive workplace culture will help executives understand more fully what the true numbers should be. This does not seem to be a concept well understood by regulators and practitioners in New Brunswick.

The best models of educating professionals for the workplace have traditionally had very close working relationships between the academic world and the world of practice. In New Brunswick, the education of RNs is managed by the major universities that operate quite separately from the major employers of the educational programs. When class sizes, educational issues and all matters relative to nursing education are discussed and up for decision, it can be very helpful to have arrangements with the employing organizations that bring practice and education together in synergistic relationship.

Various centres accomplish that synergy in different ways and the one truth is that the power of synergy is incredible. One such model involves a system of joint appointments in which certain designated nursing staff would also enjoy an appointment to the faculty; these arrangements of crossappointments allow for a high level of communication and working toward common goals.

With all that has been said about the "nursing crisis", and listening carefully to people in the field, the last thing that policy-makers should do is just throw more money at it without a clearly-defined strategy with measurable results. New Brunswick needs to learn from past errors and respond now with strong leadership directed by carefully planned strategy.

Nursing is too important in our society to leave without clear focus.

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October 22, 2019

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