



Canadian Nurses Will Soon Need University Degree



Only 45 per cent of Quebec nurses are expected to have bachelor's degrees by 2019. In Ontario, that figure stands at 70 percent. (Image Credit: Marie-France Coallier, The Montreal Gazette)

Requiring new nurses to have a bachelor's degree as of 2014 could aggravate understaffing in the already overburdened health-care system, the Quebec nurses' federation warned Sunday.

"It risks creating panic in the health-care system," Régine Laurent, president of the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec (FIQ), said in an interview after a press conference at federation headquarters.

She asked that the government hold off on its plan to require all new nurses to have a university degree for a few more years, because the conditions needed to make the new system work still aren't in place.

"It's impossible" to implement the new academic requirement without causing chaos in the health system, warned Laurent, whose federation represents 62,000 nurses, nurses' aides and other health-care workers.

"Since 2014 is just around the corner, let's take the time to put things in place first," she said.

But the Quebec order of nurses issued a statement saying the five-year phasing-in period, from 2014 to 2019, gives the health-care system plenty of time to adjust to the new requirements.

Only in 2019 will a university degree become mandatory for all new nurses, said Lucie Tremblay, president of L'Ordre des infirmières et infirmiers du Québec (OIIQ).

Quebec lags more than a decade behind other provinces in requiring a degree for nurses, the OIIQ says.

But Laurent said there is already a shortage of spaces in nursing programs at Quebec universities. She asked how universities will cope with the increased cohort of nursing students once a degree becomes mandatory in the profession.

Quebec has 73,000 nurses working in the health-care system and, each year, 3,300 newly qualified nurses enter the profession, said Roberto Bomba, a member of the FIQ executive.

Laurent said the federation doesn't oppose the idea of increasing academic requirements per se, but wants

more details on how the transition will affect the health-care system before it is implemented.

For example, there are fears the new requirements could adversely affect health care in remote regions, already grappling with a shortage of professionals, she said.

Currently, people in rural regions can train at nearby CEGEPs and find jobs locally. Requiring them to attend university could accentuate the exodus of young people from the regions and make it even more difficult for rural hospitals and clinics to recruit nurses, Laurent said.

Another question, she said, is how many prospective nurses will be deterred by the cost of a university education, compared to CEGEP, which is free, and the additional years of study required.

“We don’t want to discourage people who want to enter this profession.”

“Right now, nurses can get into the job market fairly quickly,” she added.

Laurent said it is also not clear how the responsibilities of university-trained nurses will differ from those of those with a CEGEP diploma.

“How will you recognize the experience of a nurse who has worked in intensive care for 17 years?” she asked.

“We want answers to our questions beforehand, not afterward,” she added.

The new academic requirements do nothing to address the most pressing problems in the health-care system, namely long waiting lists, overcrowded emergency wards and other access problems, Bomba said.

“We don’t see that changing the difficulties that we have in the health-care system today,” he said.

But Tremblay, of the nurses’ order, noted other provinces started adopting the requirement that nurses have a bachelor’s degree in 2000.

Even under the current plan to start phasing in the new requirement in 2014, only 45 per cent of Quebec nurses will have a bachelor’s degree by 2019, compared with 70 per cent in Ontario, Tremblay said.

Medical care has advanced greatly over the past 30 years and it is important that nurses have the general knowledge and scientific training needed to work with other health professionals, she said.

In 2011, a poll commissioned by the OIIQ found three-quarters of nurses thought nurses’ training should be increased.

The FIQ said it will hold information meetings on the new requirements across the province in the coming weeks.

“It is essential that the members get the opportunity to express their views on the issue and above all, that they know that the federation intends to defend their interests with conviction,” Laurent said in a statement.

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