



CANADIAN NURSES ASSOCIATION
ASSOCIATION DES INFIRMIÈRES ET INFIRMIERS DU CANADA

**Submission to the
Government Caucus on
Post-secondary Education
And Research**

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The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) thanks the Government Caucus on Post-secondary Education and Research for conducting public hearings on issues in post-secondary education and research. The hearings are an important opportunity to explore questions that will determine Canada's economic prosperity and social well being for many years to come.

Accordingly, the purpose of this submission is to present proposals to improve the access of nurses to post-secondary and continuing education. These proposals will improve the recruitment, integration and retention of nurses in the health care system. In turn, this will benefit both Canada's health care system and the Canadian economy.

Canada's health sector is well positioned in terms of research. The federal government has created a vibrant research infrastructure through the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Canadian Foundation for Innovation, the Centres of Excellence and the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation. In addition, many health professionals, including nurses, are conducting research that is vital to the continued health and well being of Canadians in hospitals and other institutions linked to post-secondary schools across Canada. Yet innovation is not something one associates with the workplace in the health sector, where 232,400 nurses are employed.

The Canadian health care workplace faces many problems hindering its capability to recruit, retain and integrate nurses into the health care system. For example, it is a fact that nurses lose an average of 15.5 days per year due to workplace injury and illness. As an occupational group, nurses have the highest rate of on-the-job injuries in Canada and 41 per cent of nurses in Canada cannot find full-time jobs.

These circumstances have created a statistical picture of nursing that is not pretty. The ratio of nurses to the total Canadian population has declined from 1:127 in 1996 to 1:133 in 2000. More than 28 per cent of the nursing population is over 50 years old. The number of people who graduated from basic nursing programs in 1999 totaled 3,770 – barely half of the

7,000 graduates in 1995 and a fraction of the 10,083 individuals who graduated in 1972. Three in 10 nurses now leave nursing within the first five years after graduation.

The CNA began alerting governments to these trends in 1997. The association identified a growing shortage of nurses totaling 113,000 in 10 years if present trends continue. Facilitating access to post-secondary education and to continuous learning is key to the recruitment, retention and integration of nurses in the health care system.

Peter Drucker has said nurses are the original knowledge workers. Nursing is practiced in hospitals, communities and homes. Nurses work independently and in teams. They practice in rural areas, remote posts and urban settings. Nurses treat those who are sick and advise people on how to stay healthy. They deal with life and death situations. Nursing requires the use of scientific knowledge, ethical values and analytical skills, usually acquired through university programs.

How do we facilitate the access of nurses to post-secondary and continuing education? How does this education more readily embrace research results? What role can it play in the fast-paced and highly specialized health care environment? How can post-secondary and continuing education help the health professional acquire new knowledge and skills related to advances in technology and practice? How can this education ensure the health sector is responding to the needs of Canadians?

From the perspective of the CNA, the answers to these questions lie in national leadership. Canada needs a national strategy for the recruitment, retention and integration of nurses into the health workforce. A national strategy must focus on access to post-secondary and continuing education. This strategy must also ensure a level playing field among all provinces for people considering a career in the health sector. As a result, a national strategy must focus on three important tasks in order to improve nurses' access to post-secondary and continuing education:

- Providing direct and indirect tuition support for nurses pursuing post-secondary and continuing education by way of the federal taxation system;
- Bringing post-secondary and continuing education into health care institutions so as to improve their workplaces by way of a nation-wide network of e-learning technology; and
- Ensuring post-secondary and continuing education for nurses connects research results with nursing curriculum development and practice.

The CNA acknowledges this agenda will require financial investment. However, the association believes the return on this investment will be measured in the improved health of Canadians and in productivity improvements leading to innovation in the health care sector. All of this will lead to a dynamic, knowledgeable and professional workforce, as well as growth in the Canadian economy.

Improvements in the access of nurses to post-secondary and continuing education will also allow caucus members to demonstrate to their constituents that they can help the federal government take concrete measures to improve Canada's health care system, while avoiding sterile jurisdictional turf wars with provincial and territorial governments. Therefore, the CNA hopes the Government Caucus on Post-secondary Education and Research will choose to champion this agenda with the ministers of health and finance for the upcoming federal budget.

The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) is a federation of 11 provincial and territorial professional nurses associations representing more than 110,000 Canadian nurses. Its mission is to advance the practice of nursing in the interest of the public.