

U.S. healthcare system pinched by nursing shortage.

By Will Dunham Will Dunham – Mon Mar 9, 10:34 am ET

WASHINGTON (Reuters) – The U.S. healthcare system is pinched by a persistent nursing shortage that threatens the quality of patient care even as tens of thousands of people are turned away from nursing schools, according to experts.

The shortage has drawn the attention of President Barack Obama. During a White House meeting on Thursday to promote his promised healthcare system overhaul, Obama expressed alarm over the notion that the United States might have to import trained foreign nurses because so many U.S. nursing jobs are unfilled.

Democratic U.S. Representative Lois Capps, a former school nurse, said meaningful healthcare overhaul cannot occur without fixing the nursing shortage. "Nurses deliver healthcare," Capps said in a telephone interview.

An estimated 116,000 registered nurse positions are unfilled at U.S. hospitals and nearly 100,000 jobs go vacant in nursing homes, experts said.

The shortage is expected to worsen in coming years as the 78 million people in the post-World War Two baby boom generation begin to hit retirement age. An aging population requires more care for chronic illnesses and at nursing homes.

"The nursing shortage is not driven by a lack of interest in nursing careers. The bottleneck is at the schools of nursing because there's not a large enough pool of faculty," Robert Rosseter of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing said in a telephone interview.

Nursing colleges have been unable to expand enrollment levels to meet the rising demand, and some U.S. lawmakers blame years of weak federal financial help for the schools.

Almost 50,000 qualified applicants to professional nursing programs were turned away in 2008, including nearly 6,000 people seeking to earn master's and doctoral degrees, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing said.

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One reason for the faculty squeeze is that a nurse with a graduate degree needed to teach can earn more as a practicing nurse, about \$82,000, than teaching, about \$68,000.

Obama called nurses "the front lines of the healthcare system," adding: "They don't get paid very well. Their working conditions aren't as good as they should be."

The economic stimulus bill Obama signed last month included \$500 million to address shortages of health workers. About \$100 million of this could go to tackling the nursing shortage. There are about 2.5 million working U.S. registered nurses.

Separately, Senator Dick Durbin and Representative Nita Lowey, both Democrats, have introduced a measure to increase federal grants to help nursing colleges.

Peter Buerhaus, a nursing work force expert at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, said the nursing shortage is a "quality and safety" issue. Hospital staffs may be stretched thin due to unfilled nursing jobs, raising the risk of medical errors, safety lapses and delays in care, he said.

A study by Buerhaus showed that 6,700 patient deaths and 4 million days of hospital care could be averted annually by increasing the number of nurses. "Nurses are the glue holding the system together," Buerhaus said.

Addressing the nursing shortage is important in the context of healthcare reform, Buerhaus added. Future shortages could drive up nurse wages, adding costs to the system, he said.

And if the health changes championed by Obama raise the number of Americans with access to medical care, more nurses will be needed to help accommodate them, Buerhaus said.

(Editing by Maggie Fox and Mohammad Zargham)