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New Data Reveals Nurse Certification Key Component of Patient Safety and Recruitment and Retention Programs

American Association of Critical-Care Nurses releases white paper and supporting data as nursing shortage grows more serious

ALISO VIEJO, CA (December 11, 2002) – As the worldwide nursing shortage worsens, recruiting and retaining qualified experienced nurses is a critical issue for hospitals in their pursuit to assure patient safety despite a vast array of system challenges. The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) today released a definitive report on the benefits that specialty certification for nurses bring to the public, employers and to nurses themselves. The report, titled *Safeguarding the Patient and the Profession: The Value of Critical Care Nurse Certification*, puts forth a call to action for the healthcare industry and for all who can influence and will benefit from certified nurses' contribution to patient care.

The data released today supports the growing body of evidence that proves that having the right skill mix and number of qualified nurses is necessary for good patient outcomes. Certification offers employers and patients validation that a nurse possesses the specialty knowledge, skills and experience to effectively and safely deliver care. Recently released studies conclude that, in the absence of appropriate nurse staffing, patient safety is seriously compromised and costs escalate significantly. This is of particular concern in critical care—the area of healthcare where the nation's sickest and most vulnerable patients are provided care.

“AACN has brought forth this report after many years of work on behalf of our 65,000 member nurses who are unwaveringly committed to our vision of creating a healthcare system that is driven by the needs of patients and their families where nurses make their optimal contribution,” stated AACN President Connie Barden RN, MSN, CCNS, CCRN. “This report speaks to nurses' accountability to the public and to our profession.”

Different than obtaining an RN license—which assures the public that a nurse has the required entry-level knowledge and skills to care for patients—certification is an expert credential reserved for those who meet rigorous practice, continuing education and testing requirements in their specialty. Certification has been linked to fewer medical errors and increased job satisfaction and confidence. “Hospitals that encourage and support their nurses in becoming certified demonstrate to their patients a high level of commitment to creating an exceptional care environment and, to their nurses, a culture of professionalism and retention that is imperative in

this time of shortage,” explained Margaret Ecklund, MS, RN, CCRN, APRN, BC, chair of the AACN Certification Corporation. “Further, our research shows that continuing education and certification of nurses were of high importance to consumers.”

A Harris omnibus survey conducted last month concluded that 96% of Americans believe that nurses play a major role in a hospital patient’s welfare and recovery. In the same study, 73% of those polled said they would be “much more likely” to select a hospital with a high percentage of nurses with additional specialty certification.

Pamela Thompson, MS, RN, FAAN, chief executive officer of the American Organization of Nurse Executives believes that support for certification is an important commitment that a hospital can make to their nurses and patients alike. According to Thompson, “Nurse leaders are working with administrative colleagues and other stakeholders to ensure that recognition for continuing education and certification is valued and supported.”

A 2001 study by AACN shows that, while 92% of critical care unit nurse managers encourage their nurses to become certified, less than half of U.S. hospitals provide any financial support to nurses seeking certification or recertification. AACN is calling on hospitals to improve their commitment to helping their nurses become certified.

Jack Lynch, CHE, chief executive officer of St. Luke’s Episcopal Hospital in Houston agrees. “Certification is validation for an employer and sends an important message to our communities that our nurses have the specialized skills, knowledge and experience required to provide the highest quality care.” Lynch continued, “We also believe that supporting our nurses in their efforts to acquire continuing education and to become certified is a vital part of our recruitment and retention efforts.” St. Luke’s has been nationally recognized through the Magnet recognition program for excellence in nursing services—one of only 64 hospitals in the U.S. to achieve this designation.

Reporting on the workplace characteristics that best support professional nursing practice, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing commends employers that consider nurses' educational preparation and certification when setting their responsibilities." The organization's executive director, Geraldine "Polly" Bednash, RN, PhD, FAAN, commented, "We encourage nurses to look for employers that recognize and reward education and certification, and allow nurses to practice to their full potential."

As has been widely reported the aging American population will strain our already burdened healthcare system. As the first of our baby boomers reach retirement age in 2010, the demand for nurses—especially critical care nurses—will far exceed the supply. Hospitals will be challenged to recruit and retain qualified nurses as a matter of survival. And the nurses they employ will be called upon to deliver even more intricate expert care to older patients. “The discussion of certification’s impact on nurse recruitment and retention and continuing competency is of great importance as our population grows older and lives longer,” explained Joanne Disch, PhD, RN, FAAN, who is a professor and director of the Katharine J. Densford International Center for Nursing Leadership at the University of Minnesota School of Nursing. Disch also serves as a director on several boards including AARP.

AACN and AACN Certification Corporation have issued several calls to action citing that appropriate support for vital professional resources such as continuing education and nurse certification must be placed in the forefront of today's local and national health agendas. Among the recommendations are:

For the Public:

- Become familiar with local hospital practices concerning nurse staffing, including nurse vacancies, employment of certified nurses and support for continuing education, certification and recertification. Use this knowledge when you make healthcare decisions.
- Verify that health plans are aware of nurse certification and consider it as a key factor in evaluating the quality of the care facilities with which they contract.
- Communicate to health providers the importance of consumers knowing the credentials of their caregivers.

For Employers:

- Expand a commitment to safety and quality in patient care through robust support of continuing education, certification and recertification for nurses.
- Demonstrate the value of this commitment through a dynamic internal and external communications program.
- Conduct studies to validate that certification contributes to better outcomes for your institution including nurse retention, increased job satisfaction and reduced turnover.

For Nurses:

- Protect critically ill patients by acquiring specialized knowledge and skills and demonstrate competence through certification.
- Identify yourself as certified on your name badge and when talking with patients, families, nurse colleagues and other health professionals.
- Recognize and support those who advocate for certification, continually widening the circle of advocates.

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AACN's white paper and accompanying reference documents are available at <http://www.aacn.org/AACN/mrkt.nsf/vwdoc/CertWhitePaper?opendocument>