The US health care system has seen many changes over the last sixty years culminating with the rigorous debate in 2009 and 2010 that led to the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA)—one of the largest transformations since the creation of Medicare. This transition to a more outcome-driven health care system has opened the door to a number of opportunities for providers to implement innovative new strategies to keep patients healthy.

Nurses in particular have the opportunity to make an impact on the health care system and pursue new career trajectories. For example, the passing of PPACA broadens the eligibility for Medicaid services, offering nearly 32 million Americans the chance to obtain health insurance by 2014. The law also places new emphasis on primary and preventive care. Nurses can play a vital role in the delivery of these expanded services to diverse patient populations.
The future of nursing: a larger role in health care

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Institute of Medicine (IOM) created a two-year initiative in 2008 to look at the future of nursing at the national, state, and local levels and issued a set of recommendations. The findings have particular resonance for those looking at how to prepare nurses for leadership roles, such as:

1. **Nurses should practice to the full extent of their education and training.** Today’s conditions present the greatest opportunity yet for nurses to become influential leaders of our health care system. Nurses must become full partners with physicians, health administrators, and other health care professionals to spur innovative change. However, to make these advances in leadership, training must be available through nursing school curricula and continuing education.

2. **Nurses should achieve higher levels of education and training through an improved education system that promotes seamless academic progression.** As noted in the IOM report, nurses have the unique chance to chart a number of courses for their career paths with an entry-level degree. However, for nurses to emerge as leaders of the health care system, new competencies are required, including “in the domains of community and public health, geriatrics, leadership, health policy, system improvement and change, research and evidence-based practice, and teamwork and collaboration.” These additional needs will put pressure on curricula and education systems for nurses, which must also train them robustly in clinical care. As a result, it will become the responsibility of nurses to meet higher levels of education and acquire important leadership skill sets to meet the demands of our transitioning health care system.
3. Nurses should be full partners, with physicians and other health professionals, in redesigning health care in the United States. Strong leadership in nursing is critical to the transformation of the health care system. As stated by the IOM, “While not all nurses begin their career with thoughts of becoming a leader, leadership is fundamental to advancing the profession. To ensure that nurses are ready to assume leadership roles, leadership-related competencies need to be embedded throughout nursing education, leadership development and mentoring programs need to be made available for nurses at all levels, and a culture that promotes and values leadership needs to be fostered.”

**Obstacles to advancing nurses into leadership**

As straightforward as these recommendations appear, there are several profound challenges that will need to be addressed in order to transform the role of nurses in the health care delivery system.

**Established hierarchies.** Health care delivery systems are transitioning from a narrow relationship between provider and patient to a more dynamic approach by health care teams. Hospital organizations are becoming more collaborative work environments in which the physicians, nurses, administrators, and a myriad of other health care professionals must work together to deliver high quality care to patients. As a result, the established hierarchies of the past are diminishing and nurses are playing larger leadership roles within teams.

**Traditional curricula.** In today’s nursing school curricula, rigorous clinical education is the primary focus—equipping nursing students with a high level of technical proficiency. However, a missing component is the opportunity for nurses to work on their capacity for leadership, which would enable them to be agents of innovation at every level of health care delivery.

As hospital organizations become more collaborative work environments centered on delivery of high quality care, hierarchies are diminishing and nurses are playing larger leadership roles.
Generational differences. The average age of nurses in the United States is forty-seven, and less than 8 percent of nurses are younger than thirty (Minority Nurse 2013). To meet the demands of a growing patient population, the health care profession needs to retain and fully engage baby boomer and generation X nurses. However, many veteran nurses report a rising level of frustration based on their perceptions that their experience in the clinical setting is undervalued (Misiaszek 2013). These frustrations, if addressed directly, can create opportunities for senior-level nurses to emerge as leaders and mentors—building bridges with the millennial nursing students.

Efficacy: the foundation for building nurses’ leadership capacity

As daunting as the challenges in the health care system can sometimes appear, the more proactively that nurses themselves become the leaders in creating the change, the more likely that they will emerge individually—and as a professional group—in a manner that fully leverages the opportunities ahead. The concept of efficacy offers a valuable resource in supporting nurses to embrace the current uncertainty and ambiguity in order to become drivers of change for themselves and the industry.

Training in the principles of efficacy provides nurses with a framework to ‘show up’ in a new way—one in which their voices are heard and their opinions are acknowledged.

Efficacy is the power to produce a desired effect—a set of thoughts and behaviors yielding the highest return for your investment of time and energy. As described in Social Cognitive Theory, efficacy demonstrates that individuals can learn how to more effectively create options for themselves and proactively learn a new set of skills (Lent, Brown, and Hackett 2000). Individuals can develop patterns of thought and behavior that make it more likely they will be able to adapt to changing circumstances and achieve success that is important to them.
Training based around the principles of efficacy provides nurses with the chance to continue to expand their leadership skills and embrace the many opportunities available to them as a result of the changes in health care. It offers them a framework to “show up” in a new way—one in which their voices will be heard, their opinions will be acknowledged, and their leadership will be recognized. Such training should grow out of three foundational principles:

**Development is important.** New and expanded competencies will be required to meet the demands of the health care system of the future, and the skills that have led to success in the past are likely to be insufficient in the new environment. In addition to clinical and practice area expertise, even greater levels of relational proficiency will be required to promote cohesive teams within flatter hierarchies (doctors, patients, caregivers) and the ability to create influence will be critical to shaping new structures and processes. Through the development of technical, relational, and influential competencies, nurses can be equipped with the skills needed to address the overwhelming challenges that our health care system faces.

**Leadership skills are not innate; they can be taught and learned.** Individuals can acquire any ability (clinical or leadership) through practice and feedback, and by immersing themselves in challenging new situations that stretch and fine-tune skills over time. Just as one can’t learn to ride a bike without getting on a bike, people must engage in opportunities that allow them to experiment with and practice new leadership skills.

**Openly acknowledged and honestly confronted, the obstacles can be managed.** Individuals often encounter impediments to developing new expertise (e.g., lack of confidence, lack of support, lack of resources). These hurdles tend to inhibit people from fully seizing opportunities that would enhance their leadership competencies. What differentiates those who are likely to prosper in spite of these obstacles is a problem-solving mindset that constantly asks questions such as, “What do I want as an outcome? What is getting in the way of achieving what’s important to me? Given the current reality, what is the best response I can make?” Efficacy training promotes such a problem-solving mindset so that individuals can honestly look at their situations, examine their aspirations, and fully leverage their own development, rather than being sidetracked by the external hindrances or self-doubt that are often part of any major transition.
Building on these principles, nurses will examine their current state of readiness to embrace the opportunities of the changing health care industry, build confidence in their capacity to play a critical role, and create strategies for developing new skills and competencies. Nurses are vital to quality patient-centered care. They are the bedrock of service to those in need. By providing them with educational tools that marry today’s clinical experience and the leadership skills of tomorrow, they can contribute fully to the future success of managing optimal patient care.

**Efficacy and leadership training for nurses**

Global Novations—a Korn/Ferry International company—has developed a series of three-hour instructor-led trainings accredited by the American Nurses Credentialing Center, in partnership with Tufts University School of Medicine, to build the leadership capability of the nursing community. To learn more, contact Tessa Misiaszek at tessa.misiaszek@kornferry.com.
References


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