A dear friend and professional colleague used to remind me all the time that she was a bad role model for retirement. She would declare she was retiring and then be called back to do “one more thing,” which eventually amounted to “many more things.” We always laughed that she was a great success in nursing but failed retirement. I have been ruminating on this idea recently. Specifically, I am wondering if the veterans and, to a much larger extent, the baby boomers will fail retirement. We should hope they do, if we are selfish about nursing.

With the budget crisis hitting states hard this year, many have declared (if they hadn’t already done so) that there no longer is a nursing shortage, or at least they can’t afford to think beyond their current financial demands. If we consider this situation in conjunction with the numbers of nurses who are classified as the older generations in nursing, we can quickly see that we are in for a rough ride on the sea of health care. Although some new graduates report they are unable to find positions, many positions go unfilled. These positions often are found on the “less desirable” shifts, in rural settings, and in non-acute care work. They often are not what new graduates seek and they definitely aren’t in places where highly structured residency programs exist. What they do have, however, are seasoned nurses who could help with the transition to the real world of work.

In many situations, nurses sign up to be mentors and are then assigned a mentee. In some cases, there is little if any reward system built in to support assuming this additional task. And, even yet today, some places haven’t adopted policies that retain the wisdom of seasoned nurses within the workplace. Strategies such as reduced workdays or hours or different roles have not penetrated all health care organizations. So some of the baby boomers are saying they will be successful at retiring. They don’t plan to return even if the shortage persists. Is this not a waste of true talent?

Now think of this from the viewpoint of someone who is responsible for facilitating the ongoing development of new nurses. Replacing bodies is one thing. Replacing knowledge is another. Although most of us who work in continuing education/staff development are pretty talented, we cannot replace the amount of knowledge that is about to leave the profession and doing so will take some time. Clearly, we are in a better position today with using best practices and search engines and networking than we were a decade ago. Yet, a decade ago, we weren’t faced with what could be a large exodus.

Personally, I am hoping many of our nursing colleagues fail retirement or don’t even want to try it just yet. The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing has published several articles about success in retaining wisdom in the workplace. If you have done something successful, we invite you to tell your story. We need lots of ideas!

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