

Physician Shortage Increasing Demand for Nurse Practitioners

The world's population is growing, and people are living longer. With advancements in treatment and technology, the aging population alone demands more healthcare practitioners to meet this demand.

Conventionally, these individuals would find a family doctor or general practitioner to guide their lifetime path of wellness. Unfortunately, Americans are facing a physician shortage as the need is growing, yet these healthcare needs must be met.

Primary Care Physician Shortage

The [Association of American Medical Colleges](#) predicts a physician shortage of between 46,900 and 121,000 primary care physicians by 2032. The primary care provider (PCP) is the intended first stop for many health conditions and overall guidance in patient wellness. If the trend holds, this important first step on the path of wellness will be far more difficult to take.

The [American Journal of Managed Care](#) notes that newly insured patients have increased the demand for PCPs. Plus, there are more physicians retiring than new doctors choosing to practice primary care. Rural areas have been largely underserved for many years, and fewer primary care physicians are selecting these communities for new practices. All of this is compounded by a large cohort of baby boomers who need more healthcare attention as they get older.

The fact of the matter is that becoming a family doctor is not as popular a profession as it once was. The trend for graduating physicians has flatlined as the number of graduating nurse practitioners (NPs) is rising, as noted by [Health Affairs](#).

Having a primary care provider establishes baseline health. Conditions at risk of becoming chronic may be arrested sooner with a PCP. Early diagnosis and treatment often equate to better patient outcomes. The demand for primary care is growing as the number of primary care physicians is dwindling. There are no indications that this trend will reverse. It is self-evident that a solution for patient care must be found.

Rise of the Family Nurse Practitioner

As noted above, nurse practitioner ranks are growing. The [American Academy of Nurse Practitioners](#) indicates that between 2018 and 2019, the number of NPs licensed to practice jumped by an estimated 22,000. There is a shorter runway from the classroom and clinic to helping patients, which makes the NP degree a very desirable pursuit.

Primary care is the clinical focus of the majority of nurse practitioners. In fact, nurse practitioners can deliver many of the services typically provided by a primary care physician. As patient demand increases, more and more NPs are available to resolve the myriad health concerns patients are confronted with during this physician shortage.

The flourishing number of nurse practitioners leads to greater reach administering healthcare to those who most desperately need it. Rural communities are often underserved, and metropolitan populations need sufficient care for their numbers. The prevalence of nurse practitioners has increased in both rural and nonrural settings.

In addition to clinical care, many NPs serve administrative and executive functions. For instance, family nurse practitioners receive the advanced training needed for leadership positions in the practice and community.

Expanding Nurse Practitioner Authority

While numbers of PCP nurse practitioners are increasing, some states like Florida require physician supervision of NPs practicing primary care. A few states have a transitional program that mandates physician supervision for a specified time before an NP gains Full Practice Authority for primary care. Full Practice Authority in other states permits more freedom for the PCP NP. This freedom has boosted the number of primary care NPs practicing in those states.

Even with current primary care practice restrictions in some states, nurse practitioners are making significant differences in patients' lives. American Association of Nurse Practitioners President Dr. Joyce Knestrick stated, "The faith patients have in NP-provided health care is evidenced by the estimated 1.06 billion patient visits made to NPs in 2018."

With 77.8% of all NPs delivering primary care, there is great freedom to find the right working environment for the individual nurse practitioner. The work settings for NPs are widely varied, meaning greater opportunities for their skills. Private practice, hospital outpatient clinics, inpatient hospital units, emergency rooms, urgent care, community centers and Federally Qualified Health Centers employ NPs. All of these provide an opportunity for the nurse practitioner to be a primary touchpoint in patient care.

Lifting restrictions nationwide on nurse practitioners having Full Practice Authority would benefit the health of the American population. If physicians and nurse practitioners can practice the full scope of their skills, communities would reap countless health benefits.

Sources:

[Association of American Medical Colleges: New Findings Confirm Predictions on Physician Shortage](#)
[American Journal of Managed Care: Nurse Practitioners Play an Increasing Role in Primary Care](#)
[Health Affairs: Primary Care Workforce Data and The Need for Nurse Practitioner Full Practice Authority](#)
[American Association of Nurse Practitioners: Nurse Practitioner Role Grows to More Than 270,000](#)
[Scope of Practice Policy: Nurse Practitioners Overview](#)