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### **Nurses struggle against the odds**

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GUEST COLUMNIST

Many Washington residents know that hundreds of would-be nursing students are languishing on waiting lists because nursing schools do not have enough resources -- especially teachers -- to accommodate them. But few of us realize there is a profoundly important connection between the sorry state of our health care system and the nursing crises.

Of all of the industrialized countries, the United States has the highest number of medically uninsured people. Yet we pay the most per person for health care. Waste is excessive, yet hospitals are financially flailing. Nowhere does this make more of an impact than at the bedside.

The average age of a nurse today is 47. Those nurses have worked for more than 20 years in the profession, and, quite frankly, nurses are tired. Advances in technology have not eased a nurse's workload. Patients are sicker, have a shorter stay, more medications, greater emotional and psychological needs and more than one illness. The compressed workload is the reason even new nurses are leaving the profession.

The majority of a nurse's work is invisible -- to the patient, doctor and society. Nurses must check the medications and use critical thinking to determine if a drug should be withheld, omitted or ordered. Their eyes are like Florence Nightingale's lantern, always vigilant for early signs and symptoms of a complication such as pneumonia or heart failure. They review lab results, re-assess and compare data from shift to shift. Every day, nurses at the bedside prevent patient injuries by using their excellent skills of observation.

All of those factors have driven down the amount of time a nurse can spend with a patient, and when patients barely ever see their nurse, they do not feel "cared for." As a society, we grossly underestimate the healing power of an empathetic heart, kind words, compassion and the importance of service -- until we ourselves are the patient.

When a nurse cannot spend time with her patients, she also feels an acute loss because caring is, and will always be, a two-way interaction that energizes both parties. An R.N. who is running around day after day with no time for lunch begins to feel like a robot because of the overwhelming volume of tasks. That is not rewarding, and certainly not what nurses had in mind when they entered the profession. Every day nurses struggle to keep the heart and soul of their profession alive, but with every shift, it gets harder.

As a society, we must not only question our current health care system but work to understand the complexities of what's wrong and demand change. It is not OK for a professional ball player to make \$63 million a year while nurses work without meals or breaks, and patients barely see their nurses. It is not OK for a country of our stature to have children who are sicker than their parents due to depression, diabetes, obesity, hyperactivity and hypertension -- and the greatest number of uninsured in the industrialized world. It is not OK for more than 98,000 people to die each year from hospital mistakes that were preventable.

As a citizen, you can demand that your elected officials address those issues without grandstanding. Only when health care consumers unite and insist those issues be engaged head-on will the current health care situation begin to improve. Until then, nurses will continue to struggle against the odds to care for their patients as the average age of a nurse continues rising. With compassion, they'll continue to strive creatively to solve the problems resulting from a health care system that operates as a business, instead of a universal right.

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