Health Workforce
Trends and Emerging Issues

The health workforce and its associated work environment are very dynamic. Identifying prevailing trends and emerging issues is critical to workforce planning and development. Trends and emerging issues affect not only supply and demand, but also how workers are trained, deployed and utilized.

Current health workforce trends include an increase in demand for care as the baby boomers age and a significant portion of the workforce retires. Persistent obstacles to meeting workforce demand include a shortage of faculty clinical sites for nurses and a shortage of graduate medical education funding for physicians. Other concerns noted in the American Hospital Association’s “Workforce Facts and Trends at a Glance” encompass difficulty recruiting providers into rural communities and primary care fields and generational differences.

Emerging issues, more recent developments likely to affect the health workforce for some time into the future, include:

Supply and Demand

- Increased workforce demand due to expanded insurance coverage under health reform
- Potential retention challenges due to burnout for staff serving more patients under health reform
- Focus on health profession teams to address increased demand and improve retention and satisfaction
- Increased demand for health information and informatics occupations related to health information technology (HIT) implementation
- Emerging demand for care coordination, case management, and discharge planning staff due to focus on preventative care

Education and Training

- Locating training in community settings, where care is increasingly being provided, such as training residents in teaching health centers
- Increasing education requirements for different professions, often in the form of new degrees like the Doctor of Nursing Practice
- Interprofessional training to equip health professionals to work together
Increased distance learning to expand training opportunities, especially for rural areas
Career ladders to prepare low-skill workers for more skilled positions
Emphasis on knowledge of behavioral and social science related to focus on preventative and patient-centered care

Care Delivery

Systems design: redesigning the delivery of care to use the health workforce effectively and efficiently and facilitate care coordination through models like accountable care organizations and medical homes
Scope of practice: new approaches to who provides what types of care to enable health care professionals to maximize use of their skills while still ensuring patient safety

Policy

Development of new criteria for shortage designations, to target health care access programs to the areas of highest need.
Examining the economic value of healthcare professionals and their work, to inform workforce planning efforts and reimbursement programs
Updated supply and demand projections from the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis to help states plan for workforce gaps
 Grants supporting workforce research and new models of care from the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation and Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality

Selected Sources


This publication is an archived version of a topic guide that appeared on the Health Workforce Information Center (HWIC) web site. HWIC was a national information resource covering a wide-range of health workforce issues. HWIC ceased operation as of February 2014. HWIC was operated by the Center for Rural Health at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences and funded by the Bureau of Health Professions, Health Resources and Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.