

# Healthcare Workforce Shortage: America's Next Epidemic

America is facing a healthcare crisis of unprecedented dimension, with a number of factors contributing to the impending worker shortage. We are not alone; most of the world will face similar problems in the next 10 years, and many nations are already in crisis.



## The Boomers aren't babies anymore.

The Baby Boomer generation includes the 76 million Americans born in the aftermath of WWII between 1946 and 1964 – as defined by the United States Census Bureau. The oldest Baby Boomers hit age 64 in 2010, and over the next 20 years, most of the Boomer population will retire, many of them from the medical profession leaving many healthcare jobs in demand. What's more, that huge population of aging people will require additional medical care from a healthcare system becoming increasingly over-burdened by too many patients and not enough workers.

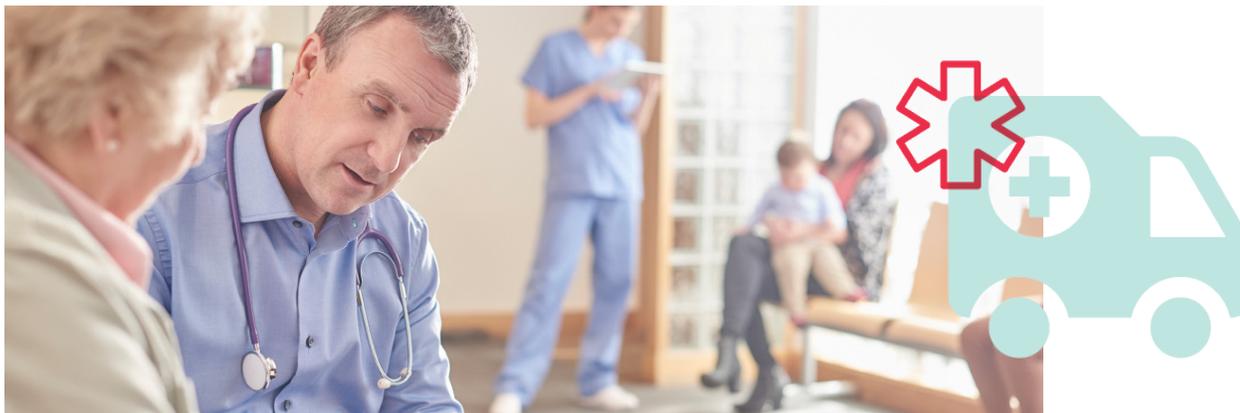
According to data from the Association of American Medical Colleges, as of 2018, about 44.1 percent of current U.S. doctors are over the age of 55<sup>1</sup>. Significantly, the movement towards medical specialization means that many of the boomer doctors who will retire are general practitioners, family doctors, general surgeons and internal medicine specialists.

**In other words, more than half of the doctors who aging people will need the most in the coming years will retire and need medical care themselves as they age.**

Doctors aren't the only ones being affected in the healthcare field; the problem extends to the nursing profession as well. According to a 2018 survey conducted by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing and The Forum of State Nursing Workforce Centers, 50.9% of the RN workforce is age 50 or older<sup>2</sup>. In addition, the Health Resources and Services Administration projects that more than 1 million registered nurses will reach retirement age within the next 10 to 15 years. With this shortage of doctors and nurses, lack of access to healthcare is becoming a big problem.

## Healthcare reform: Affordable access means an increased demand.

President Obama's healthcare bill ensures that more people can afford necessary healthcare, and at the same time exacerbates the health professional shortage. More people have access to healthcare in the US...meaning more people are lining up for immunizations, routine checkups, screenings and minor health issues they could not previously afford to have treated prior to having health insurance. In the long run, this legislation could improve the overall health and welfare of the entire United States by catching potential health issues early, educating patients and exercising preventative care.



Improved U.S. healthcare could result in dramatic impact on economic trends by reducing the average number of sick days and lowering death rates for preventable disease including diabetes and the complications of smoking. But in the short term, it is impacting the impending healthcare crisis by causing longer delays in treatment due to worker shortage.

Think the ACA is going away? Think again. While there is a new administration in office, healthcare reform is still a hot issue for many Americans. According to a recent study by Kaiser Family Foundation Health Tracking Poll, 68% of the public are in favor of keeping the pre-existing condition protections of the ACA and 54% of respondents are in favor of keeping the entire healthcare law as is<sup>3</sup>.

## **New entrant access to medical education limited by shortage in medical faculty.**

Complicating the shortage is the lack of education available to students wishing to pursue a healthcare career. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing reported that in 2018, more than 75,000 applicants were turned away from nursing education programs<sup>4</sup>. One of the main reasons cited for turning away qualified applicants was a shortage in nursing faculty. Some

community colleges report that students are often put on a waiting list for up to two years.

## **Today's epidemic is tomorrow's pandemic.**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 57 countries face a healthcare worker crisis. Most of those countries are in Africa and Asia. WHO estimates that 2,360,000 healthcare professionals and 1,890,000 health administrative support workers are necessary to fill the gap<sup>5</sup>. There is an inequitable distribution of healthcare workers with the most severe shortages in developing countries, especially in rural areas. Sub-Saharan African areas suffer the most, where eleven percent of the world population lives, served by the lowest percentage of the world's healthcare workers. To illustrate the comparison, 700,000 people live in Washington, D.C. Ethiopia has a population of more than 109 million as of 2019. Washington has double the number of doctors.

## **Reality is a tough pill to swallow... but has a few bright side effects.**

For healthcare professionals and students on track to become healthcare professionals and healthcare administrative staffers, this news is both good and bad. Increasing wait times to see a doctor are good

for no one. Crowded waiting rooms can translate to long hours and eat into the quality of life for healthcare workers, which in turn could result in more job burnout. On the bright side, job outlook and salary trends are rosy.

The healthcare industry is one of the hottest tickets in today's job market, and the demand is unlikely to lessen for many years. The rationale is there to offer things in addition to healthcare salaries, such as incentives and bonuses to hire the necessary talent. With the face of healthcare changing rapidly, there is an associated shift in responsibility with nurses shouldering more of the burden. It is foreseeable that registered nurses could wind up being as in demand as doctors and able to command far higher salaries than ever before.

In addition, older professionals in all medical areas will remain in demand, since there will be less need to move out retirees to make room for a younger workforce. The older generation is wanted and needed for their wisdom and knowledge of the profession. Older doctors and nurses will continue to work or retire when they are ready, options that may not have been as readily available a generation ago.



<sup>1</sup> Data and Reports - Workforce - Data and Analysis - AAMC. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.aamc.org/data/workforce/reports/492922/snapshot.html>

<sup>2</sup> Results from the 2017 National Nursing Workforce Survey [Pdf]. (2018, October 24). Retrieved from [https://www.ncsbn.org/2018SciSymp\\_Smiley-Bienemy.pdf](https://www.ncsbn.org/2018SciSymp_Smiley-Bienemy.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Kirzinger, A., Wu, B., & Brodie, M. (2019, April 24). KFF Health Tracking Poll – April 2019: Surprise Medical Bills and Public's View of the Supreme Court and Continuing Protections for People With Pre-Existing Conditions. Retrieved from <https://www.kff.org/health-reform/poll-finding/kff-health-tracking-poll-april-2019/>

<sup>4</sup> Nursing Faculty Shortage. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.aacnursing.org/News-Information/Fact-Sheets/Nursing-Faculty-Shortage>

<sup>5</sup> Countries. (2016, November 02). Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/workforcealliance/countries/en/>