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The Time Has Come
By Linda Gural
President of the New Jersey State Nurses Association

Nearly half a century ago, in 1960, the American Nurses Association's Committee on Current and Long-Term Goals first proposed that a bachelor's degree be the minimum educational requirement for professional nursing practice.

Ike was still President. Pete Best was still the drummer for The Beatles. It cost 4¢ to mail a letter and gas was 31¢ a gallon. Gunsmoke was the most popular television show and everybody was doing "The Twist" with Chubby Checkers.

In fact, many of the nurses practicing today were not yet born. But today in New Jersey, we still have not implemented this important and possibly life-saving recommendation made 47 years ago.

More recently, in 2001, the National Advisory Council on Nurse Education and Practice repeated the 1960 recommendation (formally adopted by the American Nurses Association in 1965) urging that two-thirds of the nursing workforce hold a baccalaureate or higher degree by the end of this decade. The Council based this new call on "changes in the nursing practice environment, including major changes in drug therapy, technology, complex changes in health care delivery systems, increasing prevalence of chronic illness, and the increasing diversity of the U.S. population." It called this renewed effort "A Fresh Approach to an Old Issue."

In New Jersey, this "fresh approach" takes the form of a new bill sponsored by Senator Joseph Vitale, Chairman of the Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee. The legislation would require registered professional nurses to earn a bachelor's degree in nursing within 10 years of their initial licensure. The legislation, which was first introduced last year, exempts already-licensed RNs.

Common sense and the facts call for the enactment of this legislation.

A University of Pennsylvania study revealed a startling statistic: at hospitals where just 20 percent of the nurses had bachelor's degrees, there were 90 deaths per 1,000 patients. There were 76 deaths per 1,000 patients at hospitals where 60% of the RNs were baccalaureate-prepared. That finding does not startle nurses as we know that we comprise the largest single component of hospital staff, are the primary providers of hospital patient care, and deliver most of the nation's long-term care. Nurse education and preparation are critical to safe care and the evidence is clear: better educated nurses mean better patient outcomes.

The legislation we have developed with Senator Vitale and others need not change the way nurses currently enter the workforce. Community Colleges and hospitals will remain a vital entry point for nursing professionals. In fact, it is our hope that even more men and women will choose nursing as a profession as a result of the bill.

The good news is that the nursing profession is already beginning to move in the direction of a better educated and more informed labor force. In 1980, the federal Division of Nursing found that more than half (55%) of all registered nurses held a hospital diploma as their highest educational credential and less than one-fourth (22%) had earned a bachelor's degree. Twenty years later, the Division's 2000 report found the number of registered nurses who held a hospital diploma was down to less than one of every four (22.3%), while those who had earned a bachelor's degree was up to a third (32.7%).

Last year, the New Jersey State Nurses Association formally joined the growing call for better educated nurses by adopting a resolution supporting the 10-year bachelor degree requirement at our general membership meeting. It was not an easy vote. Change always carries with it a degree of trepidation and fear of the unknown. But nurses have always seen the need to adapt to an ever-changing environment. They do it every single day in our hospitals, our nursing homes and in the community.

The Vitale bill meets individual nursing needs and recognizes the valued contribution that schools have been making to the nursing profession. The bill maintains all entry levels and provides for a smooth transition for educational advancement. In fact, new nurses will have up to 10 years to earn a bachelor's degree and current nurses are exempt from the requirement. There is even a "hardship" provision that will permit new nurses with special circumstances to apply for an additional two years time to complete the requirement. For some who support a more rapid transition to bachelor-degreed nurses, these exemptions and exceptions will be a red flag. Our Association recognizes, however, that we cannot punish those who entered the profession in good faith before these new requirements were put in place.

In the end this legislation will bring New Jersey nursing into the 21st Century by adopting a recommendation made near the middle of the last century. The time really has come and it is our hope that the Legislature will act quickly on this important measure.

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NJSNA is the professional association for registered nurses in New Jersey and a constituent member of the American Nurses Association.