Bachelor’s Degrees Not Only Save Lives, They Save Hospitals Money

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The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health, the seminal 2010 report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM), called for 80% of nurses to have at least a bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) by 2020. Even though research has shown that increasing the number of nurses with baccalaureates improves in-hospital mortality rates, whether there is a business case to be made for that 80% figure is unclear. A new single-hospital, patient-level study suggests that the answer is yes.

The seven-month study followed 8,500 medical or surgical patients at an academic medical center with 1,500 nurses. Yakusheva and colleagues used electronic medical records to compare outcomes of care according to increasing proportions of nurses with BSNs, examining both a 10% increase and the 80% mark. As has been seen before, a 10% increase in the proportion of care provided by nurses with BSNs improved mortality rates, in this case by 11%, and when the BSN proportion was 80%, hospital stays were 2% shorter and readmission rates dropped 19%.

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Moreover, raising BSN staffing to 80% would return an estimated $5.6 million in yearly savings to the hospital.

“The study makes the case for potentially large and sustainable financial gains from hiring more BSN-educated nurses,” says lead author Olga Yakusheva, PhD, an economist at the University of Michigan School of Nursing.

Only about half of U.S. nurses have BSNs, and 10% of hospitals have nursing staffs in which 20% of nurses or fewer have BSNs. Few hospitals are on target to reach the IOM’s 80% goal, and “getting close to 70% BSNs on staff is now considered exemplary stewardship,” says Yakusheva.

All patients deserve high-quality care, and investing in nurses’ education improves patient outcomes and increases hospitals’ income. “Passing some of these financial gains [on] to nurses with BSNs, via greater pay increases,” says Yakusheva, “could be a win–win proposition.”—Carol Potera