



**CAREER AS A
NURSE (RN)
GERIATRIC
NURSING**



Institute Research Number 887
ISBN 1-58511-887-7

DOT Number 075.264-010
O*Net SOC Code 29-1111.00

CAREER AS A

NURSE (RN) – GERIATRIC NURSING

GERONTOLOGY SPECIALTY

CARING FOR THE ELDERLY

MANY CULTURES, ESPECIALLY THOSE IN ASIA, HAVE A LONG TRADITION OF reverence and caring for the elderly that, for the most part, has been carried on today. Western societies at times in history have been less inclined to devote personal and government resources to the elderly, sometimes viewing the aged as less valuable members of society who no longer have much to contribute. Anyone with a loving elderly parent, grandparent, other family member, or friend knows that nothing could be further from the truth.



Tish Sommers and Laurie Shields, writing in their book, *Women Take Care: The Consequences of Caregiving in Today's Society*, note: "The duty of caring for failing elderly relatives is more than a family matter, a personal dilemma, or a sex equity issue. Basically, it is a problem of how our society views old and disabled people. With the growing numbers of chronically ill, it can no longer be some other family's tragedy. Eventually we must face hard questions, as individuals and as a nation."

It terms of both healthcare and overall care for the elderly, nurses have been on the forefront of pioneering efforts to make sure that the elderly are not forgotten, and that they receive the best overall care possible, whether they are in their homes, hospitals, retirement villages, or nursing care facilities. In modern healthcare, the geriatric nurse – a registered nurse who specializes in gerontology – is a core member of the healthcare team that provides services to the elderly. In fact, geriatric nurses are the healthcare professionals who provide the most hands-on care for the aged. They not only administer direct healthcare services but also make sure that the elderly's other needs are met in areas such as family education, promoting health, disease prevention, and helping to organize both the medical and societal resources available for elderly patients.

In the United States, the number of older adults is exploding onto the healthcare scene. The fastest growing age group in America, elderly Americans (those 65 years of age and older) number 35 million, already accounting for one out of every eight Americans. By 2030, that number will be 70 million or more Americans – an estimated one out of every five people in this country! Today, the elderly already make up the largest group of patients seeking care in any kind of healthcare setting.

There are endless opportunities in geriatric nursing for making a difference in people's lives. As a relatively new field, geriatric nursing offers its practitioners the chance to apply creative solutions to the needs of their patients, making a substantial difference in the quality of healthcare provided. There are few limits to what nurses specializing in gerontology can achieve. The elderly have complex healthcare needs, and the geriatric nurse can apply skills and knowledge in a broad range of traditional and nontraditional settings, from working in assisted living communities and rehabilitations centers to outpatient clinics, hospitals, and long-term care facilities.

The science of gerontology applies not only to medicine but also to both education and research. Nurses specializing in gerontology have the opportunity to continue their education and earn master's and doctoral degrees in their area of expertise. This graduate training may enable them to become important participants in research projects focusing on the elderly and to help train future generations of geriatric nurses.

Geriatric nursing is one of the most exciting and challenging areas in healthcare today. It addresses the biological, psychological, and social changes associated with aging. As the Baby Boom generation continues to reach elderly status, there will clearly be a great demand for all types of healthcare professionals who specialize in gerontology, especially the geriatric nurse.

Working with the elderly gives geriatric nurses the opportunity to make a difference in both the lives of elderly patients and the family members who love them and often help care for them. Geriatric nursing also provides both a large degree of autonomy and a great diversity of opportunities.

Caring for the elderly is challenging and rewarding as they can provide unique perspectives based on a lifetime of varied experiences. If you think geriatric nursing may be right for you, read this report to find out more about the duties, education, and earnings in the field. This report also provides insights from those who are currently working in various areas of geriatric nursing.

ASSIGNMENT: IS GERIATRIC NURSING RIGHT FOR YOU

THE FIRST STEP TO PURSUING ANY CAREER IS TO LEARN AS MUCH ABOUT THE field as possible. This report will help you get started, providing a wide range of information on geriatric nursing, including educational requirements and job duties.

Working with the elderly is not for everyone, but many people find immense satisfaction in this effort. One way to gain experience and explore whether this might be the right career for you is to volunteer or get a part-time job at a local retirement home or nursing home. This experience can provide you with many insights into what working with the elderly entails. You can also contact a local hospital to find out if there are any volunteer opportunities to work in geriatric care.

Because geriatric nurses are in high demand, it is not uncommon to find both nursing and geriatric specialists making presentations at career fairs. Meet with your high school counselor to find out more about career fairs in your area. Your counselor can also guide you toward other ways to learn more about the field.

You should also try to meet people who work in geriatric nursing. If you express a sincere interest in the field, most geriatric nurses will be more than willing to talk with you about what the work is like. Visit a local hospital, nursing home, or retirement home and ask if you can tour the facility and talk with a geriatric nurse. You can also ask about “job shadowing,” in which you can spend time with geriatric nurses during the course of their working day.

- **Am I interested in helping people get well and stay well?**
- **Do I find how the body works fascinating?**
- **Do I have an aptitude for science?**
- **Do I like being around older people?**

You can also learn about this career by going to a public library and looking for books and magazine articles on geriatric nursing and aging in general. Ask the librarian for help. A good overview of the history of geriatric nursing is provided in *Geriatric Nursing: Growth of a Specialty* by Priscilla Ebersole and Theris A. Touhy. The book includes numerous contributions from the pioneers of geriatric nursing and will give you a good insight into how geriatric nursing got started, evolved, and continues to flourish and expand. The authors also provide information on how to become a geriatric nurse and future directions in the field.

Caring for the Older Adult by Patricia O’Neill covers the essentials of geriatric nursing. Although it is a textbook, the author presents the information in an easy-to-read, informal writing style as she discusses the nature of normal aging, disorders common to the elderly, and concepts and issues related to promoting both physical and psychological health in an aging population.

HISTORY OF THE CAREER

AS A SPECIALTY, GERIATRIC NURSING IS ONE OF THE YOUNGEST AND NEWEST specialties within the field of nursing. Prior to the 1950s, care for the elderly by nurses was seen as part of the normal practice of nursing care and not as a specialty practice such as other areas of nursing, including pediatric, obstetric, or surgical nursing. Nevertheless, nurses have had a long history of caring for the aged long before gerontology was established as a substantial discipline within the area of healthcare.

The study of aging dates back at least to ancient Greece and Rome, where the Greek philosopher Hippocrates and Roman philosopher Celsus considered the clinical aspects of aging using the Latin terms *gerocomica* and *geroncomia*. The name *geriatrics* for the study of aging is believed to have originated with a Viennese physician named Ignatiz Nascher, who devoted his practice to the study of older people. Geriatrics as a medical term is believed to have first appeared in a 1909 article by Nascher in the *New York Medical Journal*. Nascher lectured widely promoting the study of aging as a medical specialty and in 1914, wrote the first textbook in the United States focusing on medical care for the elderly.

While physicians and medical researchers showed some specialized interest in the elderly, especially as people began to live longer, it was the field of nursing that had a basic philosophy that seemed to especially coincide with elderly care. As pointed out in *Geriatric Nursing: Growth of a Specialty*, medicine has been primarily interested in prolonging life, a goal that "is rooted in the ancients' hope of and search for immortality. However, the roots of nursing lie in succoring, relief of suffering, and prevention of illness. Nursing strives to provide comfort and a 'good' death and intuitively understands that the most important part of healthcare resides in the client or patient's perception. Thus, the divergent goals have been influential in the development of the specialties."

Over the years, and especially in the 19th and most of the 20th century, nursing has been the medical field that has provided the majority of hands-on care for many people on the fringes of society, especially the poor and the elderly. The origins of geriatric nursing date back to the founder of modern nursing, Florence Nightingale, who at one time worked in an institution much like the modern day nursing home. Caring primarily for sick and elderly maids and

governesses who had worked for wealthy English families, Nightingale was a lone pioneer in geriatric nursing care, as elderly care at that time was almost exclusively handled by families or by families' private physicians if they could afford one.

In the United States, nurses cared for the elderly in almshouses (homes for the poor) and several articles appeared in the *American Journal of Nursing* in the early 20th century describing the plight of the elderly poor. Among the pioneers in this area was Lavina Dock, who described the case of an 80-year-old man who was suffering from acute delirium. Another article around this time by a private-care nurse named Jessie Breeze described her work caring for aged family members.

A major change occurred in the 1930s that led to better care for the elderly. In Great Britain, a physician named Marjorie Warren established a medical practice at West Middlesex Hospital that focused on the aged. As a result, she pioneered such concepts as enhanced environment and rehabilitation focusing specifically on the needs of the elderly.

In the United States, the Social Security Act of 1935, which was designed to help the elderly become more independent, also led to the creation of nursing homes, where the elderly could now pay for care within an institution. However, these institutions were unregulated, and care for the elderly was largely substandard, with few facilities employing professional nurses.

In the 1940s, several prominent nurses and scholars noted the need for a form of gerontology nursing. Sarah Gelbach, an assistant superintendent of nursing at Goldwater Memorial Hospital in New York, published an article pointing out the need for specialized training in caring for the aged. She noted that both medical and nursing schools needed to train professionals who could attend to conditions such as senility, and also help the elderly maintain a higher quality of life for a longer time. Another article in a nursing journal discussed two institutions that had shown a high level of outstanding care for the elderly: the Cuyahoga Nursing Home in Ohio and a Jewish home for the aged in New York. Other articles by professional nurses discussed issues such as rehabilitation and psychosocial care. However, the predominant issue remained the development of a professional nursing staff focusing on the elderly.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the elderly population grew rapidly in the United States, as did the need for more facilities to help care for them. At the same time, geriatric, or gerontological nursing began to come of age, when the first textbook on nursing care for the aged was published, as well as the first nursing research article on chronic disease and the elderly. In 1958, the American Nurses Association (ANA) published its Statement of Standards for Nursing Care in Nursing Homes.

The next decades, from 1960 to 1985 saw the modern growth of geriatric nursing as a professional discipline. The passage of Medicare, the growing elderly population, and a dramatic increase in nursing homes, all pointed to the need for more healthcare professionals to tend to the needs of the elderly. In 1966, the American Nursing Association established the Division of Geriatric Nursing Practice, giving nursing care of the aged a specialty status within the field.

As the specialty gained momentum, nursing research programs increased in quantity and quality, and new master's degree programs in nursing were developed to prepare specialists in the field. The first master's program in geriatric nursing was established at Duke University in 1966. The ANA offered certification in geriatric nursing in 1974, and the first issue of the *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* was published the following year. By 1983 the first endowed chair in geriatric nursing was established at Case Western Reserve University. Ten years later, the National Institute of Nursing Research was made a separate entity within the National Institutes of Health.

Throughout the years, nurses have been in the forefront of caring for the aged. Not only have they provided hands-on care, they have been leaders in administration, teaching, program development, and research, all of which have played a major role in the development of gerontology as a profession, both within nursing and medicine generally. From *Geriatric Nursing: Growth of a Specialty*: "Dare we say that geriatric nursing will be the most needed specialty in nursing as the number of older people in our society continues to increase and the need for our specialized knowledge becomes even more critical in every specialty and in every healthcare setting?"

WHERE YOU WILL WORK

GERIATRIC NURSES WORK IN A WIDE VARIETY OF HEALTHCARE SETTINGS. IN ambulatory care, for example, geriatric nurses work in assisted living facilities, retirement communities, and in home hospice facilities. Independent living centers, for example, are an area of rapid growth for geriatric nurse specialists as these centers become a popular choice for seniors with healthcare difficulties or disabilities but who are not yet sick or debilitated enough to require advanced care in a skilled nursing facility.

Geriatric nurses work in hospitals, especially in same day surgery units and specialized Acute Care of the Elderly (ACE) units. They also work on units that provide specialized care in rehabilitation, care for dementia, and psychiatric care.

Nursing homes are a primary workplace for geriatric nurses. In nursing homes, it is the geriatric nurse who often is responsible for the overall management of healthcare for residents. These skilled nursing facilities are growing in demand as the Baby Boom generation reaches old age.

Other facilities that employ geriatric nurses include community care facilities and outpatient clinics. Home healthcare organizations are a segment of geriatric nursing care that is expanding rapidly in response to the growing demand among the elderly population to receive medical care while remaining independent in their own homes.

Adult day care centers also employ geriatric nurses. These day care centers operate on the same basis as child day care centers, providing a supportive place for the elderly to stay during the day, when their spouses, children, or other family members who care for them may be working. They also provide a respite for these family members who may just need an occasional break from the demanding home care of the elderly.

Geriatric nurses with graduate degrees may work in areas such as administration, leadership, and public policy. They may work for managed care companies, and with state and federal organizations which administer and regulate elderly care. An advanced degree in geriatric nursing is also needed to teach in a school of nursing. Geriatric nurses in academia not only train future generations of geriatric nurses but also engage in geriatric research that addresses some of the most important issues concerning older adults.

There is no geographical limitation to where geriatric nurses can work. From small towns to major metropolitan areas, geriatric nurses are needed to care for the country's rapidly growing elderly population. In major cities, geriatric nurses may provide care for many of the poor elderly living in the inner city, or work in the geriatric sections of public health organizations. In more rural areas, geriatric nurses may work in hospitals, outpatient clinics, and rural healthcare programs. They may also make home visits to patients who may live miles away from a healthcare facility.

YOUR WORK DUTIES

GERIATRIC NURSES ARE TRAINED TO UNDERSTAND AND TREAT THE COMPLEX physical and mental health needs of the elderly. Geriatric nurses address not only the biological and psychological needs of older patients but also the social changes and needs of this vulnerable patient group. Typically, geriatric nurses work as part of a team that usually includes physicians, social workers, pharmacists, rehabilitation specialists, and numerous other healthcare professionals.

Geriatric nurses are often the overall case managers for elderly patients who may have numerous healthcare needs that require attention by various medical specialists and, in many cases, numerous drug treatments. In this role, the geriatric nurse works with older patients to assess their medical conditions and provide treatment for these conditions, including acute and chronic diseases. They also maintain the patients' medical histories and help coordinate care with physicians from different specialties to address the patients' health problems. In this role, they monitor patients treatments to make sure that various complex treatments are complimentary and not interfering with one another or interacting to cause the patient other problems.

Geriatric nurses also work with patients and their families and caretakers in providing information and education about patients' conditions and treatments. For example, the geriatric nurse will explain to patients and their families issues such as medication use, change in diet, and the use of special equipment, such as blood sugar monitors.

Geriatric nursing specialists are also concerned with the functional needs of older adults. Are they able to live in their homes? Can they drive or use public transportation? Can they manage taking medications? Can they manage their houses, cook for themselves, do

the laundry, and groom themselves? The geriatric nurse will talk with patients and families about various issues, such as the need for daily exercise and adaptive equipment that may be required for the home and everyday life, including walkers, special railings in the home, and bathroom design.

The geriatric nurse's goal is not only to deal with the patients' specific health needs but also to cope with the changes patients may experience in both their mental and physical abilities. Their ultimate goal in dealing with a geriatric population is to help older people stay as independent and active as possible for as long as possible.

The general duties of a geriatric nurse include:

- Addressing a patient's acute and chronic health issues
- Assessing a patient's functional abilities needs
- Determining a patient's mental status and thinking (cognitive) skills
- Organizing medications
- Discussing common health concerns with the elderly, such as incontinence, falls, changing, and changing sleep patterns
- Educating patients and families about personal safety and disease prevention issues
- Monitoring patients to ensure they adhere to their medication regimen and that their medications are working properly
- Linking patients and families with local resources as required

Geriatric nurses focus on a wide range of medical issues that are especially prevalent in the elderly. Although geriatric patients suffer from numerous health problems that affect the general population, there are some common medical problems experienced by the elderly that are addressed by geriatric nurses.

Cardiovascular disease affects a wide age group of patients but is especially prevalent in the elderly, with 50 percent of people over the age of 65 suffering from some form of the disease. Affecting the heart and blood vessels, the disease results in disruption in blood circulation. Working closely with a physician, the geriatric nurse will help oversee various treatments and patient adherence to these treatments, which may include medication and physical exercise. In some settings, such as the nursing home, the geriatric nurse will monitor patients for signs of the disease, such as fainting, continuous chest pain, nausea, shortness of breath, and rapid heart rate.

Respiratory disease and issues are also common in the elderly whose aging bodies have diminished muscle strength in the diaphragm and thorax, a stiffer chest wall, and other physical changes that may make breathing difficult. Among the respiratory diseases common in older people are bronchitis, asthma, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Geriatric nurses typically help draw up treatment plans for these patients. In the process they work with various specialists, including heart experts, in treating patients and monitoring their ongoing health status.

Genitourinary issues include problems such as urinary incontinence, urinary tract infections, prostate disease, and prostate cancers. Geriatric nurses typically play an important role in both the diagnosis and care of these patients.

Mental health problems may include dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease, and delirium, in which a patient is confused. Both of these are serious health problems in the elderly and require the ongoing attention and care of both a physician or psychiatrist and a geriatric nurse who typically specializes in these areas. In the case of dementia and delirium, the geriatric nurse's duties include monitoring patients' conditions, ensuring that patients adhere to their medical regimens, and overseeing social services and other needs of the patients and their families.

Pressure ulcers or injures are caused by unrelieved external pressure, such as sitting or lying for long periods, typically as a result of an acute or chronic illness. Geriatric nurses typically address this problem within a holistic framework that includes assessment and research-based intervention that focuses on wound healing and comfort. The nurse will monitor wound cleanliness and the positioning of padding to reduce the risk of pressure ulceration. The nurse will also monitor the patient to see if wounds become infected, and will recommend surgical intervention when needed.

While the general duties of a geriatric nurse are universal, geriatric nurses work in different environments, from hospitals and primary care offices to nursing homes and adult day care centers. In these facilities, the geriatric nurse may have varying duties and responsibilities.

Hospital Duties

Hospitals provide care for geriatric patients who have serious healthcare needs that require not only a hospital visit but also ongoing care when the patient leaves the hospital. In this setting, geriatric nurses may work on same-day surgery units as part of the team that provides surgical services, such as cataract surgery. They work on special geriatric units and in rehabilitation. They may help care for patients with dementia and those with other special psychiatric needs that may result in delirium, wandering or combative behavior. The geriatric nurse is also concerned with special needs for the hospitalized patients, such as the staff concerns about the use of physical restraints or the development of pressure ulcers resulting from extended stays in a hospital bed.

Nursing Home Duties

Nursing homes provide long-term care for geriatric patients who can no longer live alone in their own homes or have complex medical problems that require more oversight than family members or other caregivers may be able to provide. In nursing homes, geriatric nurses typically manage the full care of residents with intermittent oversight by an attending physician. In this role their duties include assessment, diagnosis, and management of functional, physical, and cognitive impairments. They may help develop programs within the nursing home that help with early recognition of change in a resident's health status and thus help prevent unnecessary hospital admissions. They may help create programs that focus on the attainment of a peaceful death. They are also in charge of the overall medical record keeping for these patients.

Duties With Managed Care Companies

Managed care companies provide healthcare based on cost effectiveness, and include health maintenance organizations (HMOs) and preferred provider organizations (PPOs). Geriatric nurses working for these companies typically conduct utilization review and establish programs and protocols for disease management. They may also help establish automated medical record keeping to make sure that geriatric patients receive appropriate assessment across a broad range of care by numerous healthcare specialists.

Home Health Care Duties Home care may be provided by various institutions and agencies, from hospitals and private companies to government organizations. Geriatric nurses who work in home care visit elderly patients in their homes to monitor their general health status and assess their ability to remain living independently. They make sure that these patients are adhering to the medication regimen and typically provide general checkups on a patient's health, such as taking their blood pressure.

Duties in Adult Day Care Centers Adult day care centers provide places for the elderly to go during the day where they can be monitored and cared for if needed. They are often used by patients whose caregivers may have to work or who may just need some time for themselves. In these facilities, the geriatric nurse is usually in charge of general oversight of the care of people who come into these facilities. For example, they make sure that patients on medications take their required medicines at the appropriate time. They may also conduct typical health screening procedures. Most importantly, they monitor those at the day care center to make sure that patients are in good health.

Nursing School Duties Schools of nursing not only train future generations of geriatric nurses but also conduct research that addresses some of the most profound concerns of older adults. In schools of nursing, geriatric nurses with advanced degrees both teach and mentor students who are specializing in the field of geriatrics. In this role they teach specialty courses in geriatrics, provide links with various agencies so students can gain clinical experiences, and may even write or contribute to textbooks.

Duties in Academic Research In their research, the geriatric nurse working in academia may focus on a wide range of elderly health issues. For example, they may research common elderly health problems such as urinary incontinence, dementia, and congestive heart failure. Or they may focus on specific aspects of hands-on elderly care, such as devising new strategies that reduce the use of physical restraints in hospitals and nursing homes, or helping in the management of disruptive behaviors of the elderly with severe dementia.

The responsibilities and duties of a geriatric nurse are wide ranging and include not only the patient's physical needs but also

social needs and the needs of patients' families and caregivers. Administrative responsibilities may include comprehensive record keeping, and geriatric nurses who conduct research may help write journal articles. Those who reach administrative positions may oversee entire nursing departments.

The most important aspect of the geriatric nurse's various duties is serving as the elderly patient's advocate. The geriatric nurse is committed to making sure that this patient population receives the best and most comprehensive care available.

GERIATRIC NURSES TELL YOU ABOUT THEIR CAREERS

I Am a Geriatric Nurse Practitioner

"I work in a hospital and am responsible for following up on 10 to 15 patients at a time who are either currently in the hospital recovering or who are in a transitional care unit. My primary responsibility is to monitor progress of these patients as they recover. I'm also a clinical nurse specialist so I have the added responsibility of helping to educate staff throughout the hospital about how best to care for geriatric patients.

In my job I collaborate with a wide range of health professionals. In addition to physicians, I work with nurses on the unit, other nurse practitioners, pharmacists, nursing assistants, and many others. I also interact extensively with patients' families, helping guide them through the recovery process, and educating them about what to expect in the future and how to find help.

I find my job interesting, rewarding, and exciting. I also like the fact that I have excellent job security. I got into nursing because I wanted to help people, and eventually I gravitated to older patients – not because they need the most help, although they sometimes do – but because I find them extremely interesting and admire how tough some of them are in handling what are sometimes complex and difficult health problems.

One instance early in my career stands out as leading me to work with geriatric patients. I was caring for an elderly woman who was facing going to a nursing home upon leaving the

hospital. It was a difficult time for her because her son lived in another state and could not be with her much. Both her husband and her daughter had died. She was facing the loss of many of her physical capabilities as well as her independence. I would go home and find myself thinking about how I could make things better for her, even if it was just making one day a little bit brighter.

Something else I like about this field is that there are many opportunities to specialize and advance in your career. I specialize in delirium in the elderly. Approximately 80 percent of elderly hospitalized patients suffer from delirium. I keep up on the latest research in this area because preventing delirium in elderly patients can help keep them from needing extended hospital stays, and also help keep them out of long-term care facilities until later in their lives. It can even help to prevent untimely deaths.

I can't tell you how rewarding it is to see patients recovering and returning home, knowing that only a few decades ago many of them would have been viewed as lost causes and sent off to end their days in a nursing home. We've come a long way in caring for the elderly and I see many more advancements on the horizon. It's truly an exciting time to be in this field."

I Am a Geriatric Nurse Manager

"I worked for 12 years as a critical care nurse in an ICU unit before deciding to become a geriatric nurse practitioner. Working with older patients in the ICU, where many of them were near the end of their lives, I found that I had a special empathy for them. I also saw that many of them needed an advocate within the complex medical system that often appeared to be very impersonal. Essentially, I felt a calling to learn more about their special needs and to take care of them.

As a result, I decided to return to school and was one of the first to graduate from my school's then relatively new nurse practitioner program, which had only been introduced in 1994. I began my new career working as the coordinator of a geriatric assessment program, and then worked with various nursing home practice groups that provided primary care to residents in

long-term care facilities. In this position, I oversaw the management of patients with both acute and chronic conditions.

About 10 years later, I joined a large company that provides nurse practitioners to long-term care facilities throughout the country. As a manager in the company, I oversee anywhere from 10 to 12 nurse practitioners. Those under my charge typically have caseloads of up to 100 patients each.

Becoming involved in geriatric nursing is the best decision I ever made concerning my career. In the early stages of my career, I gained immense satisfaction from working with the elderly, who clearly appreciated my efforts on their part. Although I would sometimes have difficulties dealing with certain issues concerning both patients and their family members, I have received many thanks from both for my efforts on their part.

I'm less involved now in direct hands-on patient care. I still get satisfaction from knowing that I'm actually helping many more patients in my management role. I've also become more concerned with working as an advocate for the elderly and trying to advance the profession of geriatric nursing. For example, I'm involved in the American Geriatrics Society and have served on the national board of the National Gerontological Nursing Association.

While working with the elderly can be demanding and stressful at times, I strongly urge anyone thinking of a career as a geriatric nurse to investigate further. Talk with people working as geriatric nurses, and you'll find that they will be straight with you, explaining the difficulties. But they will also tell you of the great personal satisfaction they receive in helping the elderly.

We're desperately in need of more geriatric nurses so give it a look. I believe you'll be glad you did."

I Work on a Medical Behavioral Unit for the Elderly

"I work for a hospital in a prestigious academic medical center's medical behavioral unit. We deal with patients who come primarily from nursing homes and who have been exhibiting difficult behaviors that the nursing home staff has

had difficulty managing. My duties are wide ranging, from helping to dress and feed patients to administering to their medical needs, such as obtaining vital signs and giving medications.

I also spend time with these patients' families. In this role, I educate them about what is going on with their loved ones and keep them up-to-date on the plan of care. I also work in the outpatient clinic, where my primary responsibilities are to help diagnose patients with cognition problems and who also typically have medication management difficulties. I also conduct follow-ups with former patients.

I've always had empathy for the elderly ever since I worked in a nursing home one summer during high school and saw how many of them seemed in need of a friend. It seemed to me, although I was very young at the time, that our society tends to ignore the elderly once they are no longer young and vital. I quickly developed a real compassion for the older people in the home. By the time I graduated, I knew I wanted to work in a field that helps this segment of the population that is often overlooked. I wanted to give them a sense of dignity and worth, and also to help their families, who are often under enormous stress themselves as caregivers. It's fantastic that I can help reassure families that their loved ones are going to receive good care and that the family can get help in caring for them.

I find that geriatric nursing is one of the most cost-effective areas of modern healthcare. It is also a growing profession where the demand is high for nurses trained in gerontology. The Baby Boomers are demanding the best of care, and geriatric nurses are on the front lines in providing that care. Nurses who specialize in geriatrics will continue to become more vitally important to the healthcare system as this population continues to age.

Another aspect of the job that I enjoy is working with my healthcare colleagues. Although I work mostly with other RNs [registered nurses], I also work with occupational therapists, social workers, clinical managers, and medical directors. It's great to see how teamwork can provide our elderly patients with the best care possible.

I think anyone choosing a career in geriatric nursing will have a long, rich, and rewarding career ahead of them, no matter what level they're at in nursing. Geriatric nursing is a great choice because there are many educational and career opportunities to choose from.

Not long ago, there was a young woman whose grandmother was on the behavioral unit, and she began talking to me about what I do. She said she was considering a career as a geriatric nurse and asked for advice. I told her to come and spend some time with me during a work day to see firsthand what my job was like. I suggest that anyone thinking about entering the field find geriatric nurses and spend a day or so with them. See what they do with patients and families, and how they interact with their colleagues. It's a great way to get a real appreciation about what the job is all about, both the difficulties involved and the many rewards that result from working with the elderly."

I Work in a Memory

Disorder Clinic "I've been asked if working with the elderly is depressing. Most people believe that there isn't much you can do for older people who are sick or debilitated, or especially for those who suffer with cognitive difficulties or decline. These are misconceptions. I've seen many elderly patients make great strides in recovering their health and, in many cases, a great deal of independence that their families thought would be gone forever.

This is not to say that all patients will recover all of their cognitive abilities and lead a normal life again. It can be difficult dealing with patients who suffer Alzheimer's disease or other cognitive disorders. However, I feel it is my job to make sure that both patients and their families receive all the help they need in dealing with their problems. I want them to know that something always can be done to help the patient make progress. In other words, there's always hope.

One example that stands out in my mind is a woman who was undergoing some cognitive changes. She and her husband were concerned and came to our clinic to find out if she was suffering

significant cognitive impairments or if she was just showing signs of normal aging. It turns out that the woman had early-stage Alzheimer's, and it was sad to see the fear that both of them showed as they thought of all the horrendous stories they had heard about people with this disease.

Our head physician and I sat down with them and discussed the situation. We told them that there was hope and that our staff would help them deal with the situation. We discussed how it was likely to affect their lives – issues such as driving, making financial decisions, and her ability to play tennis, which she loved to do.

Since then, I've seen a dramatic change in the couple. For example, her husband is more open about her illness, and he is extremely involved in her medication management. He has taken on a bigger role as her caregiver. Helping him and other family members deal with that role is one of the most important aspects of my work.

There is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, but I have high hopes and faith that medical science will make some startling advances in treatment over the next decade or so. I try to impart my high hopes to patients and their families, while maintaining a realistic approach regarding the patients' future prognosis. It's a difficult balancing act.

I believe that geriatric nursing is much more than just providing medical care to older people. It's really discovering what makes our elderly so special, and what is unique about each individual's healthcare needs.

If you are thinking about a career in geriatric nursing, you should seriously consider several factors. First, you should like working with older people and with their families. You don't have to be Albert Einstein to succeed in this field, but you must be smart because many geriatric nurses are in leadership roles that require coordinating a patient's care with a team of healthcare professionals. Also, there are tremendous opportunities for advanced practice nurses in the field who have earned a master's degree with specialization in gerontological nursing."

PERSONAL QUALIFICATIONS

IN ASSESSING A CHOICE OF CAREERS, IT IS IMPORTANT TO TAKE STOCK OF THE personal qualifications required for success in the career of your choice. However, it is also necessary to keep in mind that not everyone starts out with all the personal qualifications needed to succeed in a particular field. Some personal traits and qualifications are inherent in an individual, while others can be developed with practice and a willingness to adjust and learn.

To begin with, there are some general qualifications that are extremely important in the nursing profession. All nurses should like working with people, including people from a wide range of backgrounds. They should have leadership and organizational skills that enable them to oversee the care of their patients. Good people skills, including the ability to communicate clearly and to have patience with peoples' health problems, are also important. Nurses should be flexible and compassionate to handle a wide range of patients who may have very different health needs and who come from all walks of life.

Problem solving skills are another trait that nurses typically have or acquire. Not all health problems are straightforward, and patients often have confusing symptoms and mysterious complaints that must be considered in addressing their needs. The ability to stay calm in a crisis is also essential, as some patients may have serious, life-threatening problems that require immediate attention and care.

Geriatric nurses deal with a specific population with special needs. For example, older patients often benefit from more than just physical care. They may need friendship as well, requiring the nurse to attend not only to their physical but also their emotional needs. Geriatric nurses are typically compassionate to the specific needs of the elderly and are able to form good relationships with the aged. They may need extra patience to interact with the elderly, who sometimes can be confused about their problems. This patient population may also be intimidated by doctors, hospitals, and the entire medical care process.

Geriatric nurses also need to be able to see the big picture. Geriatric patients typically have a wide range of issues that they are dealing with, which may include both their immediate medical needs and their broader social needs. For example, geriatric patients may be receiving care from several healthcare specialists and taking a variety of medications. The geriatric nurse has to understand and analyze the

overall healthcare plan to make sure that the patient is receiving all the care needed, and to make certain that one aspect of care or medication is not interfering with another. The geriatric nurse also has to consider social needs, such as the possible need for home healthcare, caregivers needs and abilities to care for the patient, and various community services that are available for the patient.

Another essential qualification for geriatric nurses also applies to all people working in the field of modern healthcare – the willingness to learn and continue with their education throughout their careers. The science of geriatrics and medicine are rapidly advancing, with new discoveries and changes in medical care occurring every year. The geriatric nurse must keep up with the latest discoveries and advances so that patients receive the best and most comprehensive care possible.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, geriatric nurses should like older people. They are a unique population with individual and complex needs. Patience and understanding are required to deal with the special problems they encounter during the latter stages of their lives.

ATTRACTIVE FEATURES

WORKING WITH THE ELDERLY AS A GERIATRIC NURSE OFFERS MANY REWARDS. Foremost, you receive the satisfaction inherent in helping others. Geriatric patients are facing what is often a difficult time in their lives as they must deal with more and more health and physical problems and the prospect of some day not being able to care for themselves. As a result, most geriatric patients are extremely grateful for the care that they receive. Their families and caregivers are also appreciative not only for the care their loved ones receive, but also for the reassurance and guidance that geriatric nurses offer them in their roles as caregivers.

Geriatric nurses also have a variety of educational and career options, from specializing in certain areas of geriatrics, to where they will work, which can include hospitals, nursing homes, day-care centers, home health services, government organizations, and academia.

It is also good to know that geriatric nurses are becoming a vitally important and respected member of the healthcare professions as the US population rapidly ages. They are responsible for the innovative and expert care that will be needed by Baby Boomers as they continue to reach their elderly years.

As one of the fastest growing areas in nursing, geriatric nursing offers not only many opportunities but job security. The pay is good, and the work is of vital importance to a society that seeks to support the elderly in their twilight years.

Working with geriatric patients also provides geriatric nurses with numerous opportunities to form long-term relationships with their patients. They also get to talk with patients who may have led long and fascinating lives. Older patients can have many interesting stories to tell and revelations about life that they have learned along the way.

UNATTRACTIVE FEATURES

IN A MAGAZINE ARTICLE ABOUT GERIATRIC NURSING, ONE OF THESE professionals with more than 20 years experience in the field was asked what she disliked about her job. Her reply was that she had a hard time coming up with any drawbacks to a career she loves so much.

For the most part, people in geriatric nursing are devoted to their profession and to helping the elderly. As a result, there is really little about their jobs that they don't like. That doesn't mean that the career does not have its potential drawbacks. However, keep in mind that everyone is an individual with likes and dislikes, and what some may see as negative aspects of a job, others perceive quite differently. For example, they may view "drawbacks" simply as challenges that offer great rewards when met successfully.

Working as a geriatric nurse can be emotionally stressful. Considering that geriatric nurses work with older patients, often with a complex set of medical problems, they are required to deal with patients who are more likely to die. Often they must also administer to patients who are suffering from neglect and even abuse. In addition, their patients struggle with numerous medical problems as well as financial issues that can lead to depression and other mental health problems. All of these circumstances create unique challenges.

Geriatric nurses are committed to providing comprehensive care for their patients in a respectful, understanding, and compassionate manner. However, they are only one part of the healthcare and social service team, and they cannot be around at all times to watch out for their patients. As a result, they may have disagreements with other members of the healthcare team, and with family members and caregivers, concerning the patient's care and ideas about what is best for the patient.

Some geriatric nurses work long hours and may be required to work extra shifts in times of need. In hospitals and nursing homes, geriatric nurses may also work different shifts, from the standard daylight hours to the night shift when everyone else is sleeping. In addition, like most nurses, they can be exposed to viruses and diseases.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

THE GERIATRIC NURSE'S EDUCATION AND TRAINING BEGINS WITH THE BASIC CORE healthcare training that all nurses receive. To specialize in geriatrics, you need to study to become a registered nurse first. There are basically three routes to earning this degree. The least common today is a three-year hospital diploma program. Although once the most common pathway to becoming a nurse, this type of program is now offered by only about 70 hospitals throughout the United States. This is more of a hands-on type of education similar to an apprenticeship, and training takes place entirely within the hospital setting.

Junior and community colleges offer associate degrees in nursing that can be obtained in two to three years. They combine coursework with nursing internships and hospital experience. There are about 850 associate degree programs in the United States.

While these first two options are available for initial training as a nurse, the complex aspects of caring for the elderly typically requires the more comprehensive approach to training provided by earning a four-year bachelor's degree in nursing (BSN) at a college or university. There are about 700 bachelor's degree programs offered in the United States.

A bachelor's degree program typically trains students in all aspects of nursing and patient care, providing significant time in a clinical setting where the student can apply coursework to actual patient care. Typically, students will take a wide range of courses, including anatomy and physiology, medical terminology, and chemistry for healthcare workers. Other courses may include human growth and development, nutrition, and medical ethics and law. Those students focusing on a career in geriatrics, may take special courses in gerontological nursing, and choose clinical experience caring for the elderly, in assisted living facilities, nursing homes and various agencies that serve the elderly.

After graduating from a nursing program, licensed graduates generally can work on an entry level in any state, although specific education and licensing requirements may vary from state to state. Licensing is acquired by taking the NCLEX-RN, a national licensing examination.

Advanced education prerequisites for becoming a specialized geriatric nurse are a little more complex. To specialize in gerontology, an individual must not only have completed a degree program (usually a four-year bachelor's degree) but also have worked in a supervised clinical setting before applying to graduate programs or training programs specializing in geriatric care.

Various graduate programs are available that enable a registered nurse to further acquire skills and competencies in caring for the elderly across a wide range of healthcare settings. These programs typically provide specialist skills in clinical inquiry and practice and leadership in the field of aged care nursing.

For example, master's degree programs are available in gerontological nursing, providing students the opportunity to develop a sound academic base for gerontological nursing practice. These programs typically offer various degree options. For example, nurse practitioner programs prepare students to obtain advanced registered nurse licensure to care for the general adult population as well as the geriatric population. A master's degree in gerontological or geriatric nursing trains students specifically for careers in clinical settings serving the elderly. Another option offered by some programs is a long-term care administrator degree in nursing. These programs prepare students to work as long-term care administrators in nursing homes and similar facilities. Most master's degree programs can be completed within two years and typically require a research dissertation.

The most common graduate program in geriatric nursing is the gerontology nurse practitioner program. This program can be attended full or part time and includes core graduate courses, electives, and clinical courses focusing on care for the elderly. Graduates of these programs are eligible to become gerontology certified registered nurse practitioners. They may apply for national certification from the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC). The ANCC is the largest nursing credentialing organization in the United States. It offers computer-based exams at hundreds of sites across the United States and tests four broad areas of content: primary care considerations, major health problems, organizational and health policy issues, and professional issues.

A good place for more information on nursing schools with specific programs leading to gerontological nurse practitioner or gerontological clinical nurse specialist is AllNursingSchools at: <http://www.allnursingschools.com>

Paying for Your Education

The cost of receiving a higher education has increased rapidly over the past two decades requiring potential students and their families to pay special attention to the financial aspects of going to college. The cost of a four-year nursing degree can be more than \$15,000 a year at a public college and more than \$30,000 a year at a private college or university.

Help is available from the government and other organizations. There are many types and sources of financial aid, including scholarships, loans, and student employment in the form of fellowships and assistantships. Most of the aid for students based on need comes from the federal government through large financial aid programs. Federal Pell Grants and Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants are available only to undergraduate students. The Federal Perkins Loans, the Federal Family of Education Loans, and the William Ford Federal Direct Loan target both undergraduate and graduate students. The Federal Work-Study Program is a student employment program that also is awarded to both undergraduate and graduate students.

Colleges and universities also provide aid via grants, scholarships, and fellowships. Some state governments provide aid for students attending college in their home state. Another source of aid is provided by corporations, civic associations, unions, fraternal organizations, religious groups, and foundations. Competition for these scholarships is usually rigorous.

For information on these and other programs, contact your high school guidance counselor or the financial aid office of your university. You may also want to check with your parents' employers to see if they offer financial aid packages. For information on the Federal Student Aid Program, go to: www.fafsa.ed.gov/index.htm

EARNINGS

NURSES SPECIALIZING IN GERIATRICS TYPICALLY HAVE ABOUT THE SAME EARNINGS as other registered nurses. The median salary for registered nurses is about \$60,000, with most earning between \$50,000 and \$70,000 a year. A few earn less than \$40,000 or more than \$85,000 a year.

Registered nurses working in hospitals have average salaries of about \$60,000 a year. Those working in home healthcare services earn closer to \$55,000 a year, while those working in nursing homes earn an average yearly salary of about \$50,000.

It is important to remember that salaries are also commensurate with experience, responsibilities, and where the job is located. For example, a geriatric nurse manager can expect to earn about \$70,000 a year in Colorado, \$75,000 a year in Washington, DC, and \$90,000 a year in New York City.

A geriatric nurse practitioner with an advanced degree can earn more than \$80,000 a year, with \$95,000 a year being the national average for these specialists.

Geriatric nurses who enter academia or work in administrative capacities can also earn higher wages, sometimes \$100,000 a year or more depending on their position.

Geriatric nurses also receive good benefits. Good medical benefits are especially important in today's environment of rising healthcare costs and increasing premiums for health insurance. In addition, nurses receive retirement benefits, and sick and vacation pay.

The other good news about geriatric nursing wages is that many experts expect the pay for geriatric nurses to rise over the next 20 years. They base this prediction partly on the fact that Baby Boomers are aging and have both the desire and funds to demand specialized nursing care.

OPPORTUNITIES

THE OVERALL JOB OUTLOOK FOR NURSES SPECIALIZING IN GERIATRICS IS EXPECTED to be excellent. Supporting this outlook is the fact that the aging of the post-World War II Baby Boom generation has increased the average age of typical patients. According to a recent survey, people over the age of 65 make up 60 percent of adult primary care visits and 48 percent of inpatient hospital admissions.

These percentages are expected to increase over the next two decades as more Baby Boomers reach senior citizen age each year. More than 20 percent of Americans, or 85 million people, will be over the age of 65 by 2050. The population age 85 and older could grow from 4.2 million in 2000 to nearly 21 million by 2050, with the number of people reaching age 100 expected to grow even faster, from about 75,000 in 2000 to an estimated 850,000 by 2050.

The nursing profession in general is one of the fastest growing of all career paths. There will be almost 600,000 new jobs in registered nursing over the next decade. This represents one of the largest areas of growth among all occupations. Within nursing, the single specialty that is predicted to grow most is gerontology.

Understandably, elderly patients make up almost 90 percent of all nursing home residents. By the year 2020, the need for registered nurses in nursing homes will increase by almost 70 percent.

Professional nurses working in gerontology acknowledge that there is an especially great need for those who want to have clinical careers in geriatric nursing. These nurses are needed to function as nurse practitioners in direct care with older adults and families, in clinics and hospitals, and in home care and long-term care settings. Currently, there are only approximately 2,000 certified gerontological nurse practitioners in the United States, and many more will be needed.

Another positive sign for opportunities in geriatric nursing is the increasing number of new facilities and agencies that are being developed to meet the needs of America's rapidly aging population. This will create new and varied opportunities for geriatric nurses.

The need for nurses working in home health settings, may increase by more than 250 percent within the decade. Home-based healthcare is expanding rapidly in response to the elderly population's growing demand to remain independent and in their own homes. This

independence is becoming increasingly possible because of technological advances that have led to more portable healthcare treatments, which were once available only in a hospital or clinic but now can be done in the patient's own home.

There is also a need for geriatric nurses with graduate degrees. Recent studies have indicated that nursing faculty are retiring at an increasing rate resulting in a growing demand for nursing educators to train the next generation of geriatric nurses. Geriatric nurses with master's and doctoral degrees are also needed to carry out research focusing on older adults' healthcare needs and treatments.

Because gerontological nurse practitioners function as clinical care providers, and Medicare reimbursement is available to pay for it, many more nurse practitioners are broadening their horizons by going into collaborative practices with physicians. They are also opening their own businesses in geriatric specialty practice and in home care.

Overall, demand for geriatric nurses is far ahead of the number of qualified applicants entering the field. As a result, there is a chronic shortage of staff in many areas. The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) predicts that this shortage will only intensify over the next two decades. By 2020, according to the HRSA, almost all states are expected to have shortages of nurses.

It is clear that the aging population means that community and healthcare priorities have already begun and will continue to change. More and more Americans will require skilled nursing care in a variety of settings. Geriatric nurses will also be needed for palliative care, counseling, education, and family support. As a result, demand is rising fast for specialized nurses, and now may be the best time to consider a career in geriatric nursing.

GETTING STARTED

IF GERIATRIC NURSING SOUNDS LIKE IT MIGHT BE RIGHT FOR YOU, YOU CAN GET started immediately on working toward this rewarding career. Start researching geriatric nursing via the Internet and your local public library. You can also talk to those practicing in the field to learn more about their careers and what they do. Volunteering in hospitals or nursing homes will also give you a taste of what it is like to work with the elderly.

To be accepted by a nursing school, you must have a high school diploma and sound academic achievement in a wide range of subjects. The courses you need to take to prepare for nursing school include algebra, chemistry, biology, physics, and psychology. However, it is also important to focus on English and social science courses. As a geriatric nurse you will be required to have good communication skills for interactions with patients and colleagues from varied backgrounds.

Talk to your high school guidance counselor about your plans, and to get help with choosing the courses you should take. For example, you may want to take courses in civics and social diversity to help you understand and deal with people from a wide variety of backgrounds. Your high school guidance counselor can also tell you if your high school provides Advanced Placement courses or International Baccalaureate Courses to further prepare you for your work in college.

Like all fields, modern healthcare also relies on computers and technology. A good understanding of computers and technology will be an essential asset.

You can also begin researching nursing schools that you might like to attend. The Peterson's Guide to Nursing Programs is considered one of the primary resources for learning about nursing schools in the United States. The guide is organized by both type of program and geographical area. You may also want to start investigating the application process. Most programs offer advising sessions to help potential students understand and complete their applications.

Professional organizations can also help you get started on your career. Many provide resources for students on their websites, and publications in the field can give you insights into what geriatric nursing is all about and also inform you about the latest developments in the field.

A career as a geriatric nurse offers many rewards and opportunities to make a difference in peoples' lives and in society as a whole. It's never too early to start thinking about your career goals and committing yourself to working hard to achieve them.

ORGANIZATIONS

- **American Nurses Association**
<http://www.ana.org/>
- **American Society on Aging**
<http://www.asaging.org/index.cfm>
- **National Association of Clinical Nurse Specialists**
<http://www.nacns.org/>
- **National Gerontological Nursing Association**
<https://www.ngna.org/>
- **National Institute on Aging**
<http://www.nia.nih.gov/>
- **National League for Nursing (NLN)**
<http://www.nln.org/>

PUBLICATIONS

- **American Journal of Nursing**
<http://www.ajnonline.com/>
- **American Nurse**
<http://www.nursingworld.org/tan/>
- **Generations**
<http://www.generationsjournal.org/generations/>
- **Geriatric Nursing**
<http://www.gnjournal.com/>
- **Geriatric Nursing Guide**
www.geriatricnursingguide.com/
- **Home Healthcare Nurse**
www.homehealthcarenurseonline.com/

- **Journal of Gerontological Nursing**
<http://www.jognonline.com/>
- **Journal of Issues in Nursing**
<http://www.nursingworld.org/ojin/>
- **Nursing Times**
<http://www.nursingtimes.net/>
- **The Gerontologist**
<http://gerontologist.gerontologyjournals.org/>

WEBSITES

- **AllNursingSchools**
<http://www.allnursingschools.com/>
- **DiscoverNursing.com**
<http://www.discovernursing.com/>
- **GeroNurseOnline**
<http://www.geronurseonline.org/>
- **Hartford GeriatricNursing Initiative**
<http://www.hgni.org>
- **NurseWeek**
<http://www.nurseweek.com/>
- **NurseZone.com**
<http://www.nursezone.com/>