

News

Nurse, where are the nurses?

Fewer are taking up nursing courses and current nurses are not surprised

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WHO wants to be a nurse nowadays? It seems that the vocation is waning in popularity. Fewer people enrolled as nursing students last year.

Some 1,747 people signed up as nursing students last year, fewer than the 1,862 in 2010, said the Ministry of Health (MOH) when contacted by The New Paper.

MOH said it is making efforts to attract and retain nurses in the public sector.

Nursing courses are offered at Nanyang

Polytechnic (NYP), Ngee Ann Polytechnic (NP), the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT).

NYP enrolled an average of 680 nursing students per year over the last two years.

After graduation, 98 per cent of them actually went on to become nurses, said an NYP spokesman.

NP took in 382 students for its diploma in health sciences (nursing) course this year, but did not provide figures for previous years.

Said an NP spokesman: "The intake figure may fluctuate from year to year."

"Our school of health sciences... has various outreach activities to raise awareness about nursing being a fulfilling career with many upgrading possibilities."

ITE enrolled 533 students for its Nitec in Nursing course last year, down from 541 the year before.

An ITE spokesman said 13 new Nitec courses were introduced in the last two years,



Not easy, but meaningful, say nursing students

NURSING students Audrey Foo, Gladys Aw and Eri Farah Tsuboi told The New Paper they are not discouraged by the falling numbers.

For these third-year Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP) students, taking up a nursing course was a personal decision.

Said Miss Eri: "If you are not fully committed to the idea of nursing for life, it's probably better that you do not sign up."

The 19-year-old said she chose nursing because she hopes she can one day help save lives.

"I hope to work in an accident and emergency setting. There, you can really see how you can make a difference on the spot."

"Nursing is also a caring profession, especially for patients who need it in their time of illness."

Miss Foo, 19, was inspired to be a nurse because of her mother, who is also a nurse.

She was impressed by how her mother handled a crisis situation at home about 10 years ago, when her brother fractured his arm.

She said: "His hand was out of shape and just didn't look right."

"My grandfather initially wanted to rub ointment on it. But thankfully, we called my mother in time."

"Just by hearing my brother's description of his arm over the phone, she could tell he had probably fractured it."

"She quickly drove home and took him to the hospital."

But all three agreed that nursing is not an easy job.

Gladys said she once encountered a patient in her 60s who was agitated after emerging from surgery to fix a fractured hip.

Said the 18-year-old: "She yelled at me when I tried to feed her and calm her. She kept calling me a busybody."

"But I could understand that her aggression was due to her pain. When it subsided, she was very nice to me - touching my head and thanking me often."

"It's the little things like that which make nursing meaningful."

BUDDING NURSES: (From left) Miss Eri Farah Tsuboi, 19; Gladys Aw, 18; and Miss Audrey Foo, 19, are nursing students at Nanyang Polytechnic.

TNP PICTURE: NURJANNAH ZULKIFLI

She said: "Even after the recent pay increase, I still know of managers of fast food restaurants who earn more than me."

The nurse is also dissatisfied with how she cannot make medical decisions like doctors.

"I am a trained professional," she said. "Yet, I need to get a doctor's approval to even give Panadol to patients."

Other push factors she cited were the long hours and demanding patients.

The nurse said she had worked from 7am to 10pm on several occasions and had to be on her feet most of the time.

For these reasons, she intends to quit her job within two years to become an entrepreneur.

She maintained: "Nursing is not what I thought it would be."

Another nurse said the duration one stays as a nurse is very personal. The 21-year-old, who has been a nurse for over a year, said: "Sometimes it's due to the working environment. It might also be because there are other opportunities available."

She has encountered former nurses who became paramedics and researchers with pharmaceutical companies.

She said: "It really depends on the individual. But it is true that nursing is a calling."

"Not everyone can do a nurse's job."

which included two in allied healthcare - Nitec in Community Care & Social Services and Nitec in Opticianry.

Said the spokesman: "Without any increase in the pool of school-leavers, these new courses provided a wider choice for students."

"While there was a marginal 1 per cent drop in the intake for the nursing course, the overall intake for these three courses in the health-care sector remained strong, with an intake of 702 students in 2011."

NUS enrolled 100 students for its Bachelor of Science (Nursing) programme last year, up from 86 the year before.

The number of students enrolled in its Master's in Nursing increased from 47 in 2010 to 71 last year.

'Meaningful career'

Said Professor Sally Chan, head of NUS's Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies: "Nursing is a demanding but meaningful career."

"It is also very dynamic as nursing not only requires medical and nursing science knowledge, but also interpersonal skills."

And the Singapore Institute of Technology, which started a two-year nursing degree programme offered in partnership with the University of Manchester last year, received around 150 applications for its first intake.

The MOH spokesman said it has recently enhanced the salaries of nurses. Their base salaries were bumped up by 4 to 17 per cent in April, depending on the nurse's experience, leadership and role in training the next generation, according to previous reports.

The spokesman added that MOH and the public health-care clusters have also improved career advancement opportunities, opened up new pathways for upgrading and invested in the professional development and growth of nurses.

"Nurses today can advance their careers

on the management, clinical and specialist tracks, according to their interests and abilities," added the spokesman.

"Public sector nurses can apply for scholarships and awards to continuously upgrade their skills and grow professionally."

But the spokesman acknowledged that nurses leave the profession for various reasons, like pursuing other occupations, fulfilling other personal interests, or taking care of young children or elderly parents.

Mr Mark Sparrow, Asia-Pacific head of professional and technical recruitment at hiring agency Kelly Services, told TNP that despite the recent fluctuation in enrolment figures, there was an average of 1,800 nursing students enrolling each year in recent years.

He said: "What is important here is that Singapore remains on track to meet the target set by MOH to increase the yearly intake of nursing students at tertiary institutions to 2000 by 2015."

He suggested that to encourage more people to sign up as nursing students, schools should take more responsibility in raising the profile of nursing.

They could also increase student awareness about the rewarding and many opportunities in the industry.

He added: "To further encourage students to sign on to nursing courses, universities should also offer a wider variety of courses and undergraduate scholarships."

Three nurses TNP spoke to said they were not surprised by the falling numbers. A 24-year-old nurse said about 10 people in her ward of 60 nurses quit every year.

"A lot of people wanted to be nurses just after the Sars crisis in 2003 because nurses were glorified," she said.

"But I think the public finally sees that nurses are under-appreciated and work in a very regimented environment."

The degree holder complained that her take-home pay is less than \$2,000, even though she has been a nurse for two years.

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