

Immigrants get help returning to medicine

Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - Thursday, July 14, 2005

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SUMMARY: A Clackamas Community College program eases a struggle that keeps many from using their skills, helping Oregon meet needs

CLACKAMAS -- For almost two decades, Yelena Demchenko worked as an obstetrician in Ukraine, a former Soviet republic. She delivered as many as 10 babies a night.

When she came to the United States 10 years ago, the veteran doctor wasn't allowed even to take a patient's temperature. While Oregon was suffering from a severe nursing shortage, it took Demchenko seven years to be able to take care of patients again. Now she is a certified nurse and a health care educator at Kaiser Sunnyside Medical Center.

Demchenko is the rare immigrant who persevered to find her way back into the medical profession.

"The great majority of overseas educated nurses and doctors end up doing something different. They just give up," said Adrilia Valentin, coordinator of a program designed to help others avoid the long road Demchenko had to take.

The Work Improvement for Immigrant Nurses (WIN) Program at Clackamas Community College -- the only one of its kind in Oregon -- just graduated its first 12 registered nurses. Many of the students, who hail from countries including Bosnia, El Salvador, Ethiopia and Russia, are war refugees and have been working in minimum-wage jobs that do not make use of their health care training.

Demchenko's story illustrates the value of the program.

"When I came to America, I didn't even know the alphabet," she recounted. "I opened the anatomy textbook and I didn't understand anything. It was so hard I was crying."

The former obstetrician, a Pentecostal, came to the United States in 1995 with her husband and two children to escape religious persecution. Determined to continue her career as a doctor, she started volunteering at Kaiser Sunnyside to improve her English and to familiarize herself with U.S. practices.

Within a year, she was hired to work as the only hospital health educator for the growing Russian community. She also worked as a Russian interpreter in area hospitals, courts and rehabilitation centers.

In the meantime, she enrolled in English, microbiology, anatomy and other courses at Clackamas Community College. She studied at the Kaiser hospital library late into the night.

When she felt ready, she ordered books and paperwork to help her get recertified as a doctor. But when she gave birth to a daughter, she decided the process would be too hard on her family. She enrolled in the two-year Mt. Hood Community College nursing program instead.

Seven years after arriving in the United States, she obtained her nursing license and was hired by Kaiser.

"The process of getting a job in the medical field for someone who doesn't know the American system is just daunting," said Valentin, whose nursing re-entry program has 300 eligible candidates on a waiting list.

Overseas-educated immigrants face language and cultural barriers, as well as complex state board regulations, high

recertification fees and problems getting school transcripts from often war-torn countries.

The program at Clackamas Community College, a partnership with the Legacy Health System, Kaiser Permanente, the Providence Benedictine Nursing Center, the Mexican Consulate and the Portland-based Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization, is making it easier for immigrants to get back into nursing. The program offers communication and teamwork classes and a six-month intensive nursing transition program to assist with preparations for the state board exam. Funding comes from a two-year \$200,000 grant from the Northwest Health Foundation, and students attend free of charge.

Demand is huge, Valentin said. Only about 100 of the 400 people who attended the program's initial session were eligible for the program (candidates must be permanent residents with a good grasp of English and must have practiced nursing in their country no more than 10 years ago).

Nursing experts say immigrants who worked in a medical field in their country can help ease Oregon's nursing crisis - and help diversify the medical work force, as well as ease the shortage of bilingual staff.

There are currently 1,783 registered or licensed practical nurses in Oregon who were educated outside the United States, according to the Oregon State Board of Nursing. Retraining immigrants can also decrease the controversial practice of recruiting nurses from other countries.

"We should be looking for individuals who are from other cultures, who have experience and who already live here, instead of going to Somalia and stealing their nurses," said Susan King of the Oregon Nurses Association. "And we need to make a sincere effort to increase our diversity in the state. Immigrant nurses can help us do that."

On a recent night, two young couples craned their faces toward the Labor and Delivery Department nursery window at Kaiser Sunnyside.

"Oh, that baby, little baby, it's so beautiful," the visibly pregnant women cooed in Russian.

At their side, Demchenko explained in Russian how the newborns are cared for, then led the couples down a corridor to the post-delivery rooms.

The nurse says she doesn't miss Ukraine, because medical workers there are underpaid, and hospitals don't have adequate supplies or equipment. In the United States, she adds, nurses have more responsibilities -- they perform procedures reserved for doctors in her country of birth.

"When I look down the hall," Demchenko said, "I think to myself that we've been dreaming of something like this in Ukraine, but we never thought it would be possible."

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Edition: SUNRISE

Section: Southwest Zoner South Zoner

Page: 09

Dateline: CLACKAMAS

Record Number: MERLIN_2983030

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