Nursing

Florida School Turns Doctors into Nurses
By Terese Hudson Thrall

Hospitals back program that keeps foreign-educated docs in patient care

Carolina Arguello was trained as a doctor, but during the past 20 years she’s been forced to work as an X-ray technician in a chiropractor’s office and a scrub technician at two Miami hospitals. And there were those months when she worked in a bakery and insurance office.

Arguello fled her war-torn home of Nicaragua in 1987 with her husband and daughter. Despite her medical degree, Arguello, like many foreign-trained physicians, couldn’t practice in the United States. Licensure exams, language and financial barriers were too significant to overcome. But Arguello never gave up her desire to be more directly involved in patient care, not to mention to boost her income. In the early 2000s, she entered an innovative program at Florida International University that trains foreign-educated doctors to become registered nurses.

Arguello was among the school’s first graduates in 2003 and is now a nurse at Kendall Regional Medical Center. “I see my previous medical training as a plus,” she says. “It gives me more criteria in which to view a patient’s situation. And I’m still getting to help patients and practice what I learned.”

The FIU program has produced 350 nurses who have worked in at least 11 hospitals in the state. This summer, nine students in the Tampa area used distance learning to graduate.

Foreign-educated doctors working in the Miami area first requested the program in the mid-1990s, but FIU couldn’t fund it. Then HCA’s east Florida division, two of its hospitals, and Catholic Health East’s Mercy Hospital came along and paid the direct program costs for two years. HCA wanted to both increase its nursing rolls and to improve the lives of community residents, says Beth Brill, vice president for human resources at HCA’s east Florida division.

A number of foreign-educated physicians were already working at Kendall Regional, an HCA hospital, many as phlebotomists, patient transporters or food service workers. “It was depressing to see them working in these roles, because it wasn’t a vehicle for them to use their skills,” Brill says. Meanwhile, Kendall Regional needed nurses—its annual turnover rate is nearly 14 percent.

While some might argue that these doctors should become qualified to practice medicine in the United States, it’s a formidable task. Divina Grossman, R.N., dean of FIU’s School of Nursing, who met with some 300 foreign doctors before setting up the program, found that language was the biggest barrier. The 18-month program offers courses at night and on the weekends, allowing enrollees to keep working during their training, which isn’t feasible during a medical residency and post-residency training.

Florida faces a shortage of nearly 10,500 nurses and that number is projected to climb to 52,000 by 2020, according to the Florida Center for Nursing, Orlando. Even though the FIU program produces a small number of nurses, Mary Lou Brunell, R.N., the center’s executive director, says it is a good example of “thinking outside of the box.”

There is robust demand for the nearly 100 slots available in the program each year at the Miami campus. Candidates can be in the pipeline for two years as they acquire language skills, and they must demonstrate proficiency on the Test of English as a Foreign Language to be accepted.

HCA continues its financial support through scholarships. In exchange, students agree to work at an HCA hospital for two years.

*This article first appeared in the October 2008 issue of HHN Magazine.*