

Mannequins improve training for Whatcom nursing students

MIKE ALLENDE - FOR THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Anyone who has taken a CPR or first aid class knows the image: You stare down at a somewhat creepy-looking mannequin staring blankly at you, waiting for another round of mouth-to-mouth practice. You pinch the nose and breathe into the mouth a few times. Did it work? Did you do it right? Is your patient going to make it?

For a long time that was the same way nurses were trained. Sure, they learned their anatomy and biology in the classroom, but when it came to putting their skills to work, it was either practice on a lifeless dummy or find a patient willing to be a human pincushion.

Happily for nurses and for those who count on them, training today has come a long way.

Head to the nursing labs at Bellingham Technical College and Whatcom Community College and you'll see incredibly high-tech equipment that is training nursing students in a way older nurses could only dream about.

"Becoming a nurse can be pretty overwhelming. I know it was for me," said Cindy Hollinsworth, director of nursing at BTC. "But today, we're able to give students a better sense of what really goes into patient care. We can prepare them for all kinds of situations and how patients might react, and that's something that was tough to do when I was coming up."

Annette Flanders, director of the nursing program at WCC, said students are being engaged in a much more realistic way.

"The more we can mimic reality and show them things they'll really have to deal with, the better they'll be able to handle those situations in real life," she said. "It really builds confidence. It's pretty cool, and it's also pretty fun."

Clearly, the training both schools provide is drawing plenty of attention. Both are at their maximum capacity for students in the nursing programs, and both have significant wait lists. Part of that has to do with the fact that while there is a shortage of nurses, there is also a shortage of nursing jobs. Many older nurses who might have retired by now are hanging on longer as the economy continues to limp along, leaving fewer spots in hospitals for recent graduates.

MANY TRAINING

That hasn't stopped students of all stripes from pursuing a nursing education. Nursing is no longer just the domain of young women. A greater number of people who have already put together a lengthy résumé in another field - both men and women - are turning to nursing.

Some say they're looking for a career that offers better stability. Some hope the nursing shortage makes it easier to break in. All of them say they want to help people.

Rachel May, a student in WCC's program, is a 45-year-old mother of three who decided to study nursing to better understand the asthma and breathing issues that have plagued her family, and to help others learn to take charge of their own health. WCC student Peter Moore was a victim of corporate downsizing who worked in the pharmaceutical business but turned to nursing for the potential career stability and because he wanted to give people more personal health-care attention.

Anne Krancus worked as a geologist before pursuing her lifelong passion for health care and graduating from WCC's program. Danielle Feathers started in the licensed practical nurse program at BTC shortly after graduating from Squalicum High School and is now in the registered nursing program.

All say they love the training they are getting, but say people looking for an easy road to a career better think again.



First year nursing students Peter Moore, right, and Shane Reilly practice tracheostomy care and suctioning on a mannequin under the watchful eye of Nursing Faculty and Lab Coordinator Sue Windangel, center, on a mannequin at Whatcom Community College's Nursing Lab May 12, 2011, in Bellingham.

"It is the most intense thing I have ever done in my life," Feathers said. "I would be up until 1 a.m. studying and get back up at 4 a.m. to study more before class at 8 - while I also worked two jobs."

"I felt overwhelmed both academically and emotionally," said Krancus, who graduated last June and now works as an RN with a Bellingham ambulatory surgery center. "Academically, because of new concepts that need to be understood to become a confident medical-surgical RN. Just learning it from books doesn't prepare you for the patient."

HIGH-TECH MANNEQUINS

Which brings us to the nursing labs. While students learn plenty from reading books and sitting in a classroom, it's in the labs that they can really see how things work. The labs are set up like an actual emergency room or doctor's office. Instead of a static mannequin, students work with a mannequin that can be programmed to speak, make sounds and convey emotions.

If a student does a procedure incorrectly, the mannequin can be made to react and have further complications. It's almost like working with a real patient, but without the risk of causing real harm.

May said the mannequins provide an excellent learning experience.

"We participated in a scenario in which we were to give meds to a patient," she said. "As we began to assess him, his condition suddenly began to deteriorate. It was wonderful to have the chance to put our learning into action and to 'save' our client by noticing the changes and responding in that safe setting."

"There are some things you just can't always do on live patients," said Therese Williams, BTC's associate dean of health and business programs. "Here, we can give them a scenario to deal with in real time, changing heart rates, breathing rates, make the mannequin cry, things they will face on live patients. And we can videotape them and show them it later, which is a great learning tool."

Having the high-tech mannequins is especially vital in Bellingham, because there aren't many opportunities here for nursing students to get hands-on practice. There's only one hospital in Whatcom County - St. Joseph - for students from WCC, BTC and Skagit Valley College to gain experience. With enrollment at all three programs maxed out, finding hospital time for the students poses a challenge.

"It's a real issue," Flanders said. "That's probably the most limiting factor in terms of growing our programs any more. We are really at the limit."

"Fortunately, we all work well together," Hollinsworth said. "But it does force us to be creative in terms of finding other ways for students to develop their skills."

Despite the difficulty, WCC and BTC both have full classes and long waiting lists of students eager to step in when the economy improves and more nursing positions open up. When that happens, it's clear those spots will be filled by students who received outstanding training and who one can feel confident in when they say, "This may pinch just a little."

"I want to care for people," Moore said. "I want to make a connection and help them when they are in need. Nurses are the heart of health care, and a good nurse can make an incredible difference to patients and their families."