

We read with interest the August 18 article in USA Today by Janice Lloyd, titled "Doctor shortage looms as primary care loses its pull." Much of the information contained in the article about the shortage of primary care physicians is true, but the many services provided by nurse practitioners (NPs) are not clearly defined.

Because healthcare is at the top of the national agenda as well as on the minds of most Americans, it is in the best interest of consumers that they receive all available information about healthcare professionals so that they can make intelligent and informed decisions when selecting the provider of their care. The article does not reflect that NPs provide high-quality, cost-effective, comprehensive, patient-centered primary care and in many instances, are the only healthcare provider in some communities around the country. There is no doubt that there is a shortage of primary care providers in the country today. Attached is a recent item that ran in the July 20 issue of "Roll Call." It presents a clear and concise statement about the solution to the primary care shortage – the 125,000 NPs – expert clinicians who must be a vital part of the prescription for increasing access to high-quality healthcare.

According to the February 2008, *U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report: "Primary Care Professionals: Recent Supply, Trends, Projections and Valuation of Service,"* NPs are the fastest growing discipline of primary care providers in the United States. In fact the number of primary care NPs is increasing at a rate of 9.44% per capita, compared to 1.17% per capita for physicians.

NPs have been providing primary care in the United States since 1965 and are proven expert patient-centered clinicians and the healthcare provider of choice for many people because of their unique combination of medical and nursing expertise and skills. NPs practice autonomously and in collaboration with other healthcare providers. The autonomous nature of the NP's advanced clinical practice requires accountability for healthcare outcomes. Clearly, increased utilization of this healthcare professional would lead to better access, improved outcomes and overall lower health care costs. Among their many services, NPs:

- Diagnose and treat acute and chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, infections and injuries
- Order, perform, interpret and supervise diagnostic tests such as lab work and x-rays
- Prescribe medications and other treatments
- Partner with their patients to focus on health promotion and disease prevention
- Provide health education and counseling, thus guiding patients to make smarter health and lifestyle choices, which ultimately may lead to reduced healthcare costs

Currently, Master's degrees are the minimum entry level degree for NPs. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing has issued a recommendation that all NP programs be converted from Master's degrees to Doctoral degrees by 2015, a process that is currently underway. It is important to note that the course work currently required in NP Master's programs is equivalent to that of other professional clinical doctoral programs. Many NPs have been in clinical practice as an RN for 8 – 10 years before returning to earn a Master's and in some cases, a doctoral degree, thus bringing a significant amount of expertise to patients, given the scope of the course work and clinical practice prior to coming to the NP role.

While NPs are the providers of choice for many people, better awareness of the value of NPs and increased access to their valuable services will go a long way in solving the primary care provider shortage. What sets this exceptional group of healthcare professionals apart from others is that they bring a unique perspective to health services by emphasizing both care and cure. The high level of satisfaction and confidence that patients have in NPs is evidenced by the approximate 600 million visit that are made to NPs each year.

There are over 125,000 NPs practicing in the United States, the majority of whom are practicing in primary care. In 2008, approximately 8,000 NPs graduated from NP educational programs. With proper

funding this number could be increased substantially to assist in meeting the primary care needs of the public. Better awareness of the value of NPs and increased access to their valuable services will go a long way in solving the primary care provider shortage.

The American Academy of Nurse Practitioners (AANP), the oldest and largest national professional membership organization for NPs of all specialties, was created in 1985 to provide NPs with a unified way to network and to advocate for NP issues across all specialties at the local, state, and national levels. Since its inception, AANP has continually served as a major resource for NPs, their patients and other healthcare consumers, to promote excellence in practice, education and research; to provide legislative leadership to advance health policy; to establish healthcare standards and to advocate for access to high-quality, cost-effective and personalized healthcare.

We appreciate having the opportunity to respond to your article and hope that you will assist in disseminating this information to the public as well. AANP has extensive and comprehensive research data regarding NPs and their practice and we would welcome the opportunity to work with you as a resource in the future.

Sincerely,

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