Nurses are a cornerstone in Canada's health care system. They constitute a major component of our health human resources, with an important role in virtually all aspects of health care delivery. As an integral part of the health care team, issues affecting nurses—such as working conditions—have an impact on the entire team and how it functions.

A healthy work force is a prerequisite to quality health services. Promoting healthy working conditions for all health care providers is a powerful policy lever. But, as Figure 1 shows, the solutions must come from multiple levels with collaboration among the many layers of players and stakeholders.

Multiple Levels of Influence

A recent study identifies a number of themes important in the creation of high quality health care workplaces (see Figure 2). Several of these themes have been discussed earlier in this issue (e.g., human resource issues, information, systems and structures). Figure 2 also identifies other key themes for facilitating change. Supervisory support for balancing work and life, and the transparency of the process of decision making have been found to be enabling forces in a healthy working environment (leadership). Enabling forces also include improvements in autonomy and workplace practices that ensure fairness and the flexibility of managers (work relationships).

Following Through on an F/P/T Agreement

Canada’s health care providers are part of a constantly evolving health care landscape in which factors such as an aging population and
work force and health care reforms (e.g., patient wait time guarantees) all contribute to the need for change. Health human resources are the health care system’s greatest asset. In fact, Canada’s ability to provide access to high quality, effective, patient-centred and safe health services depends on having the right mix of health care providers with the right skills, who are in the right place at the right time.

The 2003 Health Accord, signed by all First Ministers, sets out a health care renewal agenda based on consultations with Canadians, including the Romanow Commission. The Pan-Canadian Health Human Resource Strategy responds to the Accord by seeking to secure and maintain a stable and optimal health work force and supporting overall health care renewal. The three components of the Strategy contain important policy levers that can promote healthy working conditions for Canada’s health care providers. The following section describes each component and highlights some of the achievements so far.

The Strategy: Progress to Date

Interprofessional Education for Collaborative Patient-Centred Practice (IECPCP)

... changing the way we educate health providers so Canadians will have better and faster access to the health care they need when they need it, ultimately boosting the satisfaction of both patients and health care providers

Interprofessional, collaborative team-based practice may well be the way of the future. Collaborative patient-centred practice promotes the active participation of each discipline in patient care by optimizing staff participation in clinical decision making within and across disciplines, and encouraging respect for the contributions of all professionals. Increasingly, evidence suggests that collaborative, team-based practice results in improved job satisfaction — key to a healthy working environment.

Figure 2: Key Themes Critical to the Creation of High Quality Health Care Workplaces

The IECPCP component of the Strategy has made significant strides in promoting interprofessional education and collaborative patient-centred practice. It has developed a theoretical framework, funded 20 learning projects across Canada, and established a Canadian Interprofessional Health Collaborative to help identify promising practices. These efforts will contribute to IECPCP’s growing evidence base and, by extension, promote positive working relationships and working environments for tomorrow’s health care providers. Other achievements include:

- efforts to support interprofessional collaboration through the identification of specific liability barriers, which prevent health care professionals from working together
- educational initiatives on interprofessional collaboration partnerships for patient-family centred care

Recruitment and retention of health care providers/professionals

... encouraging more people to enter the health care field and improving working conditions to keep them there

There are current and impending imbalances in the supply of health care providers across a wide variety of disciplines. As the health work force continues to age, demand for services increases; and as the workplace becomes more global, the need to appropriately recruit and retain health human resources is becoming essential. We have seen shortages increase...
the strain upon those left to provide the care. Using a multi-pronged approach, this component of the Strategy is addressing provider shortages.

Efforts include a promotional campaign in partnership with the Canadian Medical Association and the Canadian Nurses Association that targets health professions generally and, more specifically, recruitment of young people.

As well, the Internationally Educated Health Care Professionals (IEHPI) initiative has worked in partnership with provincial and territorial governments and stakeholders in facilitating the assessment and integration of internationally educated health care professionals. One goal is to help alleviate the burden of work on overextended health care providers already in the system.

A major component of the recruitment and retention component of the Strategy is the Healthy Workplace Initiative (HWI) which will build momentum for positive change and provide a basis for a shared vision of a healthy workplace by identifying innovative initiatives that promote healthy workplace practices.

The main objective is to support current actions by health care organizations to create and maintain healthy work environments by addressing symptoms of unhealthy workplaces, focusing on front-line patient care or related health services, and supporting initiatives that lead to improvements in:

- work environments
- health and well-being of health care staff
- job satisfaction and quality of work life

Four million dollars has been invested in a series of provincial and national projects. For example, in Newfoundland and Labrador, a project entitled *Creating a Culture of Safety* creates awareness and recognition of a culture of safety, while balancing the mental, emotional and physical health needs of employees. In Québec, the McGill University Health Centre is improving workplace health for individuals and helping organizations address their unique work force challenges through *Programme inter-hospitalier de recherche-action sur le climat de travail*. In Manitoba, the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority’s *Healthy Workplace Project* is working to increase morale, job satisfaction and productivity, and to reduce accidents and absenteeism by creating a healthier workplace culture.

Some other activities of the HWI include:

- a Quality Worklife-Quality Health Care Collaborative which is working to develop an integrated action strategy to transform the quality of work life for Canada’s health care providers
- a study on retaining and valuing experienced nurses through innovative healthy workplace practices
- sharing practices through a series of knowledge exchange activities
- supporting the implementation of healthy workplace strategies in the areas of home and community care settings

Over the long term, the HWI will contribute to enhancing the recruitment and retention of health providers/professionals, the quality of patient care and patient safety, and operational excellence.

**Pan-Canadian health human resource planning**

*... ensuring we have enough of the right types of health care providers to meet the needs of Canadians*

This component is designed to ensure that Canada has the right mix of health care providers, now and in the future. It will consider the trends, gaps and risks associated with the health work force and establish a process for collaborative decision making.

Progress to date is promising and includes work through the *Health Human Resources Databases Development Project* and the *Health Cross-Jurisdictional Labour Relations Database*. These projects will aid planners in ensuring that appropriate health human resources are in place which will decrease the strain felt by front-line providers, improve working conditions and, ultimately, enhance the quality of health care services. This work includes physician resource projection modelling and a Health Human Resources Modelling Working Group to advance a network of policy and technical experts.

**Framework for Collaborative Pan-Canadian Health Human Resource Planning**

The Advisory Committee on Health Delivery and Human Resources (an F/P/T committee reporting to the Conference of Deputy Ministers of Health) has recently developed a *Framework for Collaborative Pan-Canadian Health Human Resource Planning*.
**Pan-Canadian Health Human Resource Planning** that will help shape the future of health human resources planning and health service delivery in Canada. The Framework will be a powerful tool in improving the working environments of health care providers.

In the proposed approach, each jurisdiction will continue to plan its own health care system, develop service models, and develop and implement health human resources policies and plans. However, all jurisdictions will do this within the context of a pan-Canadian framework that shares information and works collaboratively to develop the optimum number and mix of providers needed to meet their needs by enhancing each jurisdiction’s capacity to:

- plan for the optimal number, mix and distribution of health care providers, based on system design, service delivery models and population health needs
- work closely with employers and the education system to develop a health work force that has the

**Critical Success Factors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Success Factor</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate stakeholder engagement</td>
<td>• Delivery models based on population health models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Changing skills and competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Consultation and timely communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong leadership and adequate resources</td>
<td>• Leaders at all levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Champion collaborative health human resources planning and shared vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Resources to support planning functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear understanding of roles and responsibilities</td>
<td>• Different issues best addressed at appropriate levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A focus on cross-jurisdictional issues</td>
<td>• Value added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tools that enhance capacity to plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Priorities based on consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A change in system or organizational culture</td>
<td>• Need to understand current cultural landscape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Readiness to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Health care providers as a valuable asset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Issues identified that affect recruitment and retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Decisions that support healthy workplaces and increase job satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>• Responsive to changes in system design and the impact of those changes on health human resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The goals and objectives are to improve health human resources planning in general and, specifically, to enhance working environments. Success will depend on the partners’ commitment to a more collaborative approach. The critical success factors for applying the Framework and building this commitment are listed in the sidebar below.

**Conclusion**

Canada’s health care providers are our health care system’s greatest asset. Their health and well-being affect the quality of care within the health system. Healthy working environments support healthy providers, and a healthy cadre of providers will help all levels of government, health care organizations, health professional associations, and providers themselves, attain the goal of a strong and sustainable health care system.

As noted in the article on page 13, “workplace and work force issues alike call for collaboration and input from all levels of government, in partnership with front-line health care providers, professional organization and other stakeholders.” The federal, provincial and territorial Framework for Collaborative Pan-Canadian Health Human Resource Planning offers an important policy lever. Its power will be in a continued collaboration.