

RNs' delayed retirement boosts US nursing supplies, study finds

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Older registered nurses are working longer than in the past, one reason that the nation's supply of RNs has grown substantially in recent years, according to a new study.

Researchers found that from 1991 to 2012, among registered nurses working at age 50, 24 percent remained working as late as age 69. This compared to 9 percent during the period from 1969 to 1990. The findings are published online by the journal *Health Affairs*.

"We estimate this trend accounts for about a quarter of an unexpected surge in the supply of registered nurses that the nation has experienced in recent years," said David Auerbach, the study's lead author and a policy researcher at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "This may provide advantages to parts of the U.S. health care system."

Findings indicate that the [registered nurse](#) workforce has surpassed forecasts from a decade ago, growing to 2.7 million in 2012 instead of peaking at 2.2 million as forecast. While much of the difference is the result of a surge in new nursing graduates, the size of the workforce is particularly sensitive to changes in retirement age, given the large number of baby boomer RNs now in the workforce.

Auerbach and colleagues found that in the period 1969 to 1990, for a given number of RNs working at age 50, 47 percent were still working at age 62. In contrast, in the period 1991 to 2012, 74 percent were working at age 62.

The trend of RNs delaying retirement, which largely predates the recent recession, extended nursing careers by 2.5 years after age 50 and increased the 2012 RN workforce by 136,000 people, according to the study.

Because many RNs tend to shift out of hospital settings as they age, employers may welcome the growing numbers of experienced RNs seeking employment in other settings. These include health care delivery systems such as accountable care organizations that—prodded by the federal Affordable Care Act—may be seeking to reduce hospital-based care.

The study's researchers say the reasons that older RNs are working longer is unclear, but it is likely part of an overall trend that has seen more Americans—particularly women—stay in the workforce longer because of lengthening life expectancy and the satisfaction they derive from employment.

Provided by RAND Corporation

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