Behind the Front Lines

A recap/critical look at health care news and the reality behind the reporting from the viewpoint of front-line Ontario registered nurses

Three Things
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Labour Day Coverage Shows More Optimism

ONA members were out in force for Toronto’s Labour Day parade. Nurses know how to fix what ails the health-care system and are united in advocating for change.

The Ontario Nurses’ Association – the union representing 62,000 front-line registered nurses and allied health professionals as well as more than 14,000 nursing student affiliates – noticed a marked increase in media coverage this Labour Day.

Not only was there increased coverage, but the tone has changed, showing a real sense of optimism.

Ignoring the usual, expected “death of labour” pieces in some of the more conservative media outlets, a Toronto Star opinion editorial (source) predicted that if things continue the way they are expected to, Labour Day 2017 “may be even more upbeat than this one. Not bad for a movement that has so frequently been written off as an obsolete relic.”

The piece references the sweeping review of labour relations rules and employment standards now being carried out in Ontario and the new, more cooperative relationship between Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and labour unions as a source of the optimism.

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Ontario RNs Have a Defined-Benefit Pension Plan That Works

There has been much ink spilled over the recent GM-Unifor contract that eliminates the commitment to providing young workers with a defined benefit (DB) pension plan and instead provides a defined contribution (DC) plan.

The Toronto Star’s Martin Regg Cohn’s angle on this unfolding story (source) is praise for the politicians who came together to expand the country’s Canada Pension Plan “just in time.”

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What is ONA?
The Ontario Nurses’ Association (ONA) is the union representing 62,000 registered nurses and allied health professionals and more than 14,000 nursing student affiliates providing care in Ontario hospitals, long-term care facilities, public health, the community, clinics and industry.

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Who is Linda Haslam-Stroud, RN?
ONA President Linda Haslam-Stroud, RN (pictured), is a veteran renal transplant nurse who is an expert spokesperson on a range of issues. Linda is available to comment on everything from workplace violence, patient care, health care policy in Ontario, the flu pandemic, nursing cuts, public health and much more. Simply contact ONA’s media relations officer, Sheree Bond, at (416) 964-8833, ext. 2430 if you would like to interview Linda on a health-related issue.

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Labour Day Coverage Offers More Optimism, cont’d from page 1

The Star piece says that the federal government’s approach to the recent CUPW negotiations – i.e., to send in a mediator rather than force workers back to work in the event of a strike – “serves everyone well, not just unions.”

In Port Elgin, a reporter with the Owen Sound Sun Times (source) even quoted a 92-year-old retired nurse about the importance of labour unions.

The nurse, Ruth Beattie, walked from her nursing home to watch the town’s Labour Day parade and noted the horrible working conditions for RNs when she first started her career. She said that the Ontario Nurses’ Association, “which the nurses still belong to," managed to bargain a shift differential for nurses working the afternoon, overnight and evening shifts.

View of Unions Positive, Says Poll

Along the same upbeat lines as seen in the province’s Labour Day coverage, a new Gallup poll on Americans’ perception of the labour movement is also showing more positive support (source).

Overall, 52 per cent of Americans polled say they believe that unions help the U.S. economy, as opposed to 41 per cent who say unions hurt it. This is dramatically different than in 2009, when just 39 per cent said unions help the economy.

Historically, Americans have evaluated unions more positively than negatively. However, that support slipped during the recession of 2008.
Minnesota Registered Nurses Strike Shows Similarity of Issues for RNs on Both Sides of the Border

Clawbacks of benefits, workplace safety and RN staffing levels are all issues for Ontario’s front-line registered nurses, and it seems they are for Minnesota RNs as well.

As Canadian Press reported (source), thousands of registered nurses in Minnesota started an “open-ended strike” in a dispute over health insurance, workplace safety and staffing on Labour Day.

While the fact that hospital RNs in Ontario do not have the right to strike makes the two nurses’ unions fundamentally different, it’s informative to read the list of nurses’ grievances.

Ontario RNs frequently mention concerns about workplace safety and inadequate RN staffing levels, and recent hospital-sector contract negotiations ended up in arbitration due to the pursuit of clawbacks by the Ontario Hospital Association.

In Ontario, the concerns around inadequate RN staffing stem from austerity measures that have resulted in hospital funding being frozen for almost a decade. In Minnesota, the concerns come as the private, for-profit hospital chain, Allina Health, seeks to maximize profit.

Premier’s Net Zero Announcement Comes Too Late for Ontario RNs

Media coverage of an arbitration award for Ontario registered nurses working in hospitals was province-wide early in September (source).

The coverage focused on the fact that RNs received a 1.4 per cent increase in each of two years of the contract – an increase that is less than the inflation rate.

Reports focused on the fact that RNs said the raise was disappointing, especially in comparison with similar decisions for male-dominated union members that were much more generous, while hospitals said the award was far too generous.

Ontario hospital RNs have had years of either wage freezes or increases below the rate of inflation, falling further and further behind.

Just weeks after the arbitration decision was released, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne announced that the era of public-sector austerity was over, as her government is on track to balance the budget in 2017-18.
Cohn believes that with the GM/Unifor deal to eliminate DB plans for new workers, the death knell has sounded for these pensions.

While Ontario RNs haven’t seen wages that kept up with inflation, they do have a DB pension plan that is fully funded and a model for how and why these types of pensions are possible.

The Healthcare of Ontario Pension Plan (HOOPP) is a model of success. The plan provides a secure retirement income to 309,000 health-care sector workers, has more than enough assets to pay pension benefits owed to members now and in the future, is administered by a Board of 16 members – including representation from ONA – and acts in the best interests of members. As ONA President Linda Haslam-Stroud notes, HOOPP’s DB pensions enable cost-effective retirement for workers, save taxes and boost the economy.

The Board and HOOPP President and CEO Jim Keohane are responsible for all aspects of the plan and the multi-billion-dollar HOOPP Fund. It approves contribution rates and Plan design, establishes investment policy, monitors investment performance and makes any Plan changes (other than fundamental changes).

While Cohn and other reporters note the death knell of such pensions, HOOPP continues to stand as a model of success and a good argument for the continuation of such security for Canadian workers.

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**Defined-Benefit Pension Plan, cont’d from page 1**

ONA is more than a little startled to read Howard Levitt’s column (source) on proposed changes to the Ontario Labour Relations Act, 1995 and Employment Standards Act, 2000.

The over-the-top piece leaves readers wondering whether the province is intentionally driving corporations into bankruptcy.

Levitt, a senior partner of employment and labour law firm Levitt LLP, warns that should the province enact the proposed changes as detailed in The Changing Workplaces Review, Ontario will see a “world where jobs will leave the province at an unprecedented rate.”

His analysis of the proposals in the interim report includes statements such as: the changes “would make the province the most radical left-wing environment for businesses in the Western world;” and, “would go a long way toward ensuring that no foreign business would ever again invest in it.”

Perhaps Levitt is going a little too far in his disparaging remarks, especially in light of the investigative series in the Toronto Star (source) that detailed low-wage workers routinely being exploited by businesses that fail to pay them.

Levitt’s argues against strengthening the Acts and says that doing so would "create a wholesale shift of power to Ontario unions and demolish what few employer rights remain."

Ontario nurses know that union members have hardly had an easy time of it the past decade or so in this province. Unionized nurses have seen approximately three million hours a year of RN care cut from the front lines. They have had close to a decade of either wage freezes or modest wage increases of less than the rate of inflation.

The reality is that Ontario workers face low-wage, temporary or casual employment with no paid sick leave and no benefits or pensions. The reality is also that some employers have long since left the province for countries where they can use cheap labour, exploit workers and not be subjected to employment standards.

The result is Canada’s out-of-control personal debt-to-income ratios for ordinary workers. What the country needs is better quality jobs for all, with common-sense protection in place against exploitation, believes ONA.
UNDER THE RADAR

News the Media is Missing

U.S. Counting on Robots to Fix RN Shortage?

The Daily Beast (source) recently published a bizarre report on the development of robotic nurses.

Just as in Canada, the U.S. is facing a severe shortage of registered nurses. The report notes that even though the number of RNs in the U.S. will increase by 19 per cent by 2022, the demand is growing faster than the supply. There will be more than one million unfilled RN vacancies by that time.

The report suggests that technology from Japan is rapidly advancing and that “Nursebots” will be a reality. Toyohashi University of Technology has already developed a robotic medical cart that can make rounds, deliver medications and other items, and retrieve records. The cart follows a doctor or nurse who use it to record and access patient data. Terapio has “expressive eyes that change shape and make it seem responsive,” reports the Daily Beast.

There is also a “Nursebot” named Pearl who reminds patients to take medications, use the bathroom or shower, and get ready for appointments. The most bizarre is the Robear, a robot designed to look like a giant teddy bear in order to allow it to successfully interact with people.

Its role is to help lift patients as they struggle to sit, stand and walk. As one common RN injury is back and knee damage from lifting patients, the developers hope it will lower the incidence of this type of nurse injury.

Fortunately, the report does not seriously suggest that human RNs will ever be obsolete. It notes that robots cannot decide courses of treatment or make diagnoses, but perhaps they may one day free up RNs to focus on the patients with the most urgent needs.

More to the point, Ontario RNs’ “critical thinking” and ability to detect subtle changes in a patient’s condition simply can’t be replicated by a robot.

Losing Canadian RNs: Report Details the Allure of International Nursing for New Grads

International nursing opportunities are tempting for young RNs. The lack of full-time, permanent positions in Ontario makes travel and experience elsewhere particularly alluring.

In Ontario, the health-care system loses a number of newly graduated registered nurses each year to other jurisdictions.

With the recent waves of RN layoffs in underfunded hospitals, even seasoned nurses are heading elsewhere to practice, when possible. For instance, experienced RNs at Windsor Regional Hospital who were among the 169 RNs laid off this year have turned to Detroit’s Henry Ford Hospital for employment.

A lack of permanent, full-time jobs for RN graduates (who often have large student debts) is just one reason why RNs leave the province that educated them.

A report in the Halifax Chronicle Herald (source) follows the adventures of one young RN as she uses her skills to both help care for patients and see the world.

As is the case for many new RNs lucky enough to land a job, the prospect of 20 overtime night shifts in a row prompt them to think about a change. Thea Doucet experienced just that, and learned of an agency that helps RNs find work internationally. Doucet has worked in Saudi Arabia and hopes to continue her nursing career in Australia.
Home for the Aged Offering Incentives to Attract, Retain Nurse Practitioners

Interestingly, while RNs continue to be cut from hospitals, one home for the aged is considering supplementing salaries in order to attract and retain Nurse Practitioners (NPs).

The Belvedere Heights Home for the Aged may be subsidized by Parry Sound-area municipalities in order to staff up (source).

Provincial funding for NPs is higher for hospitals than for nursing homes, and Ontario’s limited supply of NPs are opting to work in hospitals.

While representatives on local councils are petitioning the province to increase NP funding to their sector, the area municipalities are working to enable Belvedere Heights to pay a supplement to the NP salary rate.

This kind of news is more commonly seen with regard to doctors. It is routine for smaller communities to offer incentives and pay top-ups to physicians to come and practice in rural areas.

For ONA, it is refreshing to see the common-sense approach of Parry Sound-area councilors to take action and recognize/value the skills that NPs bring to the table.

NPs are registered nurses with extended training. They provide a wide range of primary care, ordering tests, diagnosing patients, referring to specialists when appropriate, and can write an array of prescriptions. NPs have demonstrated their value, saving the health-care system money while providing excellent primary care in communities across the province.

FOR MEDIA ONLY:
Behind the Front Lines – an electronic newsletter that takes a look at the stories behind the stories.

Need a reliable and informed source?
Speak to front-line nurses!

The Ontario Nurses’ Association has a whole host of experts in health care. ONA members work in hospitals, long-term care, public health, the community and industry and can answer your questions as health care continues to evolve in this province.

Contact ONA.

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