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HEALTHCARE REFORM WILL NOT BE ACHIEVED WITHOUT SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN NURSING EDUCATION AND POLICY

The increased numbers of advanced practice nurses needed to provide primary care to the 32 million currently uninsured Americans to be covered under healthcare reform will require far-reaching changes including national uniformity in how nurses are allowed to practice, and how they are educated, such as moving the minimum educational requirement for nurses to the bachelor's degree, write two Penn Nursing professors in today's issue of The New England Journal of Medicine in separate articles.

"Between 3 and 12 nurse practitioners can be educated for the price of producing one physician, and this can be accomplished more quickly than traditional medical education," writes nursing professor Julie Fairman, PhD, RN with former Health and Human Secretary Donna Shalala, PhD, now president of the University of Miami urging states to adopt uniform scope of practice laws. The recently-passed Affordable Care Act is expected to add 32 million Americans who will need primary care to the healthcare rolls.

However, producing enough nurses to bridge the gap will be a "mathematical impossibility" unless the minimum degree for nursing is raised to a bachelor's, writes nursing professor Linda Aiken, PhD, RN, noting that 3.5 times as many nurses from bachelor's programs as from two-year programs go on to achieve master's degrees to enable them to provide primary care, or doctorates to become faculty members to teach the next generation of nurses. Currently, nurse practitioners staffing the start-up retail clinics see patients in 3 million visits in 1,000 clinics nationally, but the profession graduates only 8,000 nurse practitioners annually.

In addition, shortages may be exacerbated as variations in state law may mean that states with tougher regulatory barriers restricting nurse practitioners' authority to write prescriptions or conduct chart reviews may reduce patients' ability to find primary care providers as many nurse practitioners migrate to less restrictive states, writes Fairman. And