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New RRT program at Conestoga

Job prospects for registered respiratory therapists are excellent

By DAVID CHILTON, SPECIAL TO THE TORONTO SUN



Conestoga College's new respiratory therapist program begins this September with an inaugural class of 45 students selected from almost 300 applicants.

Good for them. But will they find jobs when they graduate? Almost certainly.

Lori Peppler-Beechey, a registered respiratory therapist, professor and program co-ordinator at Kitchener's Conestoga, says a 1999 Canadian Society of Respiratory Therapists study found that from about 2010 onwards there will be a significant number of RRTs retiring from the profession. Also helping to improve the employment outlook for new therapists is their expanding role in the health care system, she says.

"Another factor is that, as many people are aware, we have a baby boomer population that's aging. As that happens in the next five, six years, a lot of the diseases that we will see in our aging population are things like heart disease, lung disease, cancers. All of those diseases require the services of a respiratory therapist," Peppler-Beechey says.

Mary Bayliss, professional practice advisor for the College of Respiratory Therapists of Ontario in Toronto -- the profession's regulatory body -- and a member of Conestoga's program advisory committee, says she's impressed with the homework the college did before it launched the new three-year course.

Every school in Canada that offers respiratory therapy training must adhere to national standards, Bayliss says, although there will be some differences from one school to another.

"Conestoga has a fairly impressive computer simulation lab that will clearly assist the students before they go on clinical rotation," Bayliss says.

The Conestoga students' entire third year will be taken up with clinical rotation. That means they will spend time in hospitals, clinics and in patients' homes working and observing; for example, a student may spend three blocks of four weeks in an intensive care unit, or certain other fixed periods in an operating room or a neo-natal

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or rehabilitation unit.

The minimum requirements for acceptance into the Conestoga program is high school graduation with Grade 12 English, Grade 12 math and either Grade 11 or 12 physics, chemistry and biology. Peppler-Beechey says she expects most of her students to come straight from high school, although she points out the RRT program would be excellent for someone who already has an appropriate degree of diploma. All students must write a national qualifying exam to be eligible to practice.

"Any level of maturity you bring to the program is an asset," Peppler-Beechey says. That's because respiratory therapists work with people who are very ill and must be able to cope with such heartbreaking situations as their first infant death, she says, and they can't "turn green" when they walk through a hospital's doors.

Peppler-Beechey expects about a 60% female, 40% male split in her first class. Tuition for the program is about \$1,800 a year.

"The majority of graduates will work in an acute care hospital setting, and that, generally speaking, is in the ICU (intensive care unit), in the emergency ward. Respiratory therapists are specialists in airway and ventilation," Peppler-Beechey says. They also work with cardiac arrest and trauma teams, high risk deliveries and in other situations where breathing may be compromised, she adds.

RRTs can also work outside a hospital. They can work in diagnostic labs, in home care and in equipment sales and service, Peppler-Beechey says, and the pay is comparable to nursing and some other medical occupations. She says how much a respiratory therapist earns depends on location. But in an urban centre such as Toronto or Kitchener-Waterloo, the average starting rate is about \$20 an hour.

QUICK FACTS

- Conestoga's program begins in September with 45 students.
- Applicants must be high school graduates with credits in English, math, physics, chemistry and biology.
- After three years of study, students must write a national qualifying exam.
- RRTs usually work in intensive care units and emergency rooms.

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