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Years ago Linda Dietrich's weight problem cost her a nursing job, but it later led to a lucrative career in weight training and personal fitness.

Carolyn Laskey retired from her nurse's job after injuring her hip. Now she heads a thriving business that summarizes patients' charts for 50 area doctors.

And Pearl Bryant, a 20-year nursing veteran burned out on hospitals, now owns two small retail stores with her husband in Tampa. Last year their Wicks 'N' Sticks candle and home fragrance shops were named Minority Business of the Year by a bay area group. These days many career nurses are leaving the bedside for the business world.

As the nursing shortage worsens and the health care industry struggles to enhance nurses' roles, many nurses are striking out on their own. Thousands are forging their own companies or operating independently as consultants and contractors.

Initially, in the early 1980s, most nurse-entrepreneurs formed businesses to serve patients at home, because hospitals were reducing patient stays to cut their costs.

Now they are becoming stress management consultants, medical experts for lawyers, financial planners and health care marketers. Many form health care companies serving hospitals, insurance companies or doctors.

Others become writers, teachers and publishers, exercising their creative skills in ways they rarely could in a hospital.

"Nurses are poorly understood," said Susan Farese, a Treasure Island registered nurse (R.N.) who also is a health care consultant, teacher and poet.

"Nurses have extensive education in humanities, science and sometimes the arts. They have a lot of insight into how people tick. We learn sales, administration, customer service and how to motivate and inspire people."

Nationwide about 15,000 registered nurses have become entrepreneurs or independent operators, said David A. Norris, 40, founder of the National Nurses in Business Association in Petaluma, Calif. The 4-year-old group has 1,000 members nationwide.

"Hospital nurses have a lot of responsibility and low pay," said Norris, an R.N.

"If you're smart, that gets to be real frustrating real quickly. Starting your own business allows you to get out of that vicious cycle."

Linda Dietrich knows about vicious cycles.

Six years ago she was manager of the six-bed open-heart unit at Bayfront Medical Center in St. Petersburg. She worked 60- and 70-hour weeks and had time only to eat junk food between shifts.

She helped set up Bayfront's cardiac rehabilitation program but, she said, she was told that she was too obese to market it effectively. Dietrich quit.

"I was so humiliated; I was beaten," she recalled. "I had done incredible amounts of work and I was made to feel like that didn't matter. What matters is how you look."

(Bayfront won't discuss the specifics of her departure but says its policies prohibit discrimination based on appearance.)

Dietrich was determined to lose weight and rebuild her life, so she hired a personal weight trainer and went on a low-fat diet. A year later and 100 pounds lighter, Dietrich began helping other nurses and doctors lose weight.

With a \$15,000 loan she started Dietrich's One to One, a personal weight training and fitness business in Largo.

The business has grown to include four personal trainers and a constant flow of 35 or so customers a day. Dietrich said she plans to triple its size and acquire new weight equipment this summer.

"What was one of the worst things at the time turned

out to be one of the best things to happen to me," she said. "One day you're going to see my business on the cover of Inc. magazine."

Despite it all, Dietrich still considers her new career part of nursing.

"It's teaching people how to take care of themselves before they get to the point where heart attacks happen," she said.

"I'm using everything I learned in nursing."

Several nurse-entrepreneurs say they use their nursing skills and talents in business.

"Nurses are multifaceted," said Ruth Fanovich, an R.N. who is marketing a cartoon character on T-shirts and plans to write children's books.

"They can do bookkeeping, they're highly skilled in technology, in people skills, in intelligence. Under that cap is a brain."

"They are always portrayed as sex symbols with the front of their dresses open," she added. "And they are always in their (nurses') lounge. . . . I always wanted to know, where is this lounge?"

Pearl Bryant doesn't remember much about nurses' lounges. For 20 years she worked her way up the nursing career ladder in New York hospitals.

At the end of her career, before she moved to Florida, she had become an assistant administrator, but she was tired.

"I don't want to be near a hospital now," she said.

She and her husband owned a liquor store, but when they moved to Florida they decided to buy a Wicks 'N' Sticks franchise, selling candles, fragrances and home accessories.

Now she enjoys the interaction with people who are healthy.

"As a nurse you had to listen to assess what was wrong; as a merchant I listen to customers to determine what they would like to have, what would work best in their house," she said.

Nevertheless, retailing in a recession can be as complicated as nursing, she said.

"These are recessionary times and discretionary income is down," she said. "These are things your mother never told you about."

Not all nurse-entrepreneurs find it easy to leave the caring professions behind. Even Bryant maintains her license and stays abreast of advancements in AIDS treatment and other health issues.

Dietrich explained it this way: "Nursing is kind of a golden handcuffs kind of thing. It pays a lot but you pay a lot to be a nurse.

"Sure, I made \$24 an hour, but . . . let me tell you what I did in that hour: I got a person in who had had a heart attack in a restaurant, we administered CPR, he had a couple more heart attacks, I put him in a body bag, dealt with the family and cleaned the bed in time for the next patient."

That kind of rigorous grind is ultimately what drove Carolyn Laskey out of nursing and into her own business.

Five years ago she injured her hip while lifting a patient.

The injury permanently slowed her and, at age 50, she faced unemployment and very little retirement income.

She founded Doctors Discharge Summary Service Inc. in Seminole.

Laskey performs a service that most doctors dislike doing: summarizing patients' charts after they are discharged from the hospital. It is an arduous task but necessary for insurance reimbursement.

Now Laskey has four associate nurses and one physician's assistant handling 50 doctors at 10 area hospitals.

Laskey manages the office, writes and plans for expansion.

"We're adding three doctors a week," she said.

"In the beginning I did it out of necessity. Now I love it."