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Senior certified nursing assistant Cecil Gascon (left) and certified nursing assistant Fedelyn Domingo help Hale Makua resident Rose Ah Sam

WHO WILL CARE FOR US?

By LEE IMADA, News Editor

KAHULUI – With a shortage of nursing assistants on the island and the situation expected only to worsen with the growing elderly population, an intensive five-week course is being offered to train more of these “frontline” health care workers.

And it’s free for the 10 students selected.

Maui Community College is offering the nursing assistant class beginning Oct. 8 with the support of the County of Maui and the Maui Long Term Care Partnership.

Nursing assistants work closely with the patient, and act as the “eyes and ears” of the registered nurses and licensed practical nurses, who use the information to help make decisions about patient care, said Patricia Duckworth, a registered nurse and assistant professor in the college’s nursing program.



Fedelyn Domingo, certified nursing assistant, helps Hale Makua resident Rose Ah Sam with her lunch Monday morning.

“Nursing assistants are on the front lines,” she said. “They can say, ‘Mr. Jones doesn’t look right. You need to check him.’ ”

Nursing assistants perform a lot of patients’ day-to-day care – such as giving baths, changing beds, feeding and offering social interaction, she said. Nursing assistants do not perform some of the more technical tasks, such as giving injections.

“The nursing assistant is the right-hand person for the nurse,” said Duckworth, who will teach the course.

The work is difficult and demanding on physical and emotional levels, she said. Those in care homes are not at their best emotionally and physically, she said.

“You have to really love working with older adults and have an appreciation of what they have to offer,” said Duckworth. “There is so much they have to offer.”

Nursing assistants, who make between \$11 and \$15 an hour, are in great demand on Maui and across the nation. Every nursing home on the island has a shortage of nursing assistants, said Duckworth. According to the 2006-07 edition of the Occupational Outlook Handbook from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nursing assistant is listed as one of the top-20 fastest-growing jobs in the United States.

And with the population aging, the demand will grow. Duckworth wondered aloud, “Who is going to take care of me?”

This pilot program was born of a need to handle baby boomers, who are reaching retirement age and the twilight of their lives. The cost for

a class like this runs about \$1,000 with tuition, books, uniforms and other fees. But the county, the partnership and MCC are picking up the tab.

The class consists of 60 hours of class work, and 90 hours of laboratory and clinical experiences. The student nursing assistants will do a lot of “dry labs,” practicing on one another, learning the skills needed for the job while gaining an understanding of what it’s like to be a patient.

“It leads to a lot more empathy,” Duckworth said.

Students who successfully pass the course will earn six college credits and a Certificate of Competence, and will qualify to take the American Red Cross certification examination for nursing assistants, which includes a written and practical phase.

Some students in the program may use the certification as a stepping stone to becoming an RN or LPN, but it is hoped that most will remain as nursing assistants, said Duckworth.

In fact, program officials have come up with a new title for nursing assistants to raise their profile. On their badges, MCC nursing assistant students will find the term “kahu ola,” which translates to the “honored guardians of health and well-being,” said Duckworth.

Geriatric care has developed and evolved in the 30-plus years Duckworth has been in nursing. In fact, there was no geriatric discipline when she graduated from Salve Regina University in Rhode Island. For much of her career, the focus was on “warehousing” the frail elderly in a hospital-like setting, with two patients, who didn’t know each other, in a room separated by a curtain, she said.

The new model for elderly care is to create a more “home situation” with patients having their own rooms and even bathrooms, to keep them in that setting as they age.

“All cultures seem to have a reverence of the kupuna . . . to age with aloha and to remain independent,” said Duckworth, who is an advanced-practice registered nurse in gerontology.

Her title stands as an example of how specialized elderly care has become.

The course that she teaches will take 10 students, and more than 10 people have signed up so far, she said. The deadline for applications is Oct. 1, after which candidates will be selected.

The inability to speak English proficiently will not be a problem, she said. The Maui Language Institute on campus has offered its assistance to the program.

Those selected will have to sign a letter of intent to attend classes, pass the tests and work on Maui for at least a year. Class schedules and labs will vary. "Graduation day," or the last day of classes, will be Nov. 10.

Duckworth is looking for people of all ages, even retirees who may have pondered a career in nursing at one time in their lives. The class is rigorous, because the job is rigorous, she added.

"We're looking for people who love the elderly, who have compassion, who want to make a difference in an elderly person's life – that desire to be next to a resident as much as possible."

If you are that person, contact Duckworth at 984-3476 or 283-3243.

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