

# Rx for Doctor Shortage?

Expanding nurses' range of duties is one way to address our nation's shortage of doctors.



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BY KARA HINKLEY

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**A**merica faces a critical shortage of doctors—as many as 91,000 by 2020, according to some estimates. Aging baby boomers, coupled with an influx of 30 million Americans into the health care system under the Affordable Care Act, are expected to create an unprecedented demand for medical services.

Legislators are exploring a number of ways to meet the need, including filling the doctor shortage with nurses who have

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advanced degrees in family medicine. Since January 2011, state legislatures have considered nearly 2,000 bills that address nurses' and other health professionals' range of duties, or scope of practice. Most of the roughly 200 bills debated so far this year would lift restrictions on advanced practice nurses and physician assistants and allow them to do what primary care doctors do—examine patients, order tests, diagnose and treat illnesses, and prescribe and administer drugs.

The level of autonomy of advanced practice nurses (who are often called nurse practitioners) varies by state. In 17 states and the District of Columbia, they are allowed to work independently of doctors. Another 10 states require them to be supervised by doctors, although the amount of supervision varies.

