Registered Nurse

Q: Are you a U.S. citizen or permanent resident, or do you have unrestricted employment authorization granted by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service?
A: I was born in Canada, but I've lived in the United States for fifteen years and I am now an American citizen.

Nurse recruiters ask this question because some years ago hospitals were doing a lot of recruiting outside the country, making the job search difficult for nurses in the U.S. At the time, it was not easy to find qualified nurses within our borders, whereas there were some very good nurses in Canada. Also, hospitals on the upper East Coast and the West Coast needed nurses who were bilingual. Then the U.S. government stepped in and imposed regulations requiring that hospitals have a vacancy rate over 7 percent before they recruit outside the country.

Q: What are your nursing qualifications?
A: I have worked for ten years as a staff nurse with experience in all areas of nursing. I've also worked in quality assurance, and I currently work in ambulatory medicine.

The recruiter is looking for both solid experience and a wide range of experience. This nursing candidate has both. The candidate's answer is also well articulated. Practice your answer to this question so that your answer is a brief summary of relevant work experience only.

Q: What are your primary responsibilities in your current nursing job?
A: I run the ambulatory medicine facility. This means I make sure the actual logistics of the operation run smoothly on a day-to-day basis. It also means that I spend a lot of time rolling up my sleeves taking blood, for example, or whatever is needed.

Experience is extremely important in nursing. The recruiter is digging to be sure this candidate has significant work experience. Prove to the recruiter that your job is more than a mere title, just as this candidate has done.

Q: What did you do before your current nursing job?
A: I was the hospital quality assurance manager. I oversaw a team of nurses, although I spent most of my time determining patient releases as well.

Of course the recruiter will know what a quality-assurance job entails, but the candidate has cleverly slipped in a definition nevertheless. Because this job requires significant nursing ability and knowledge, the recruiter will undoubtedly be impressed. This candidate also shows breadth of experience.

Q: What nursing degrees do you have?
A: I have a master's in nursing administration. I received a B.S. in sociology before that, and an R.N. previous to that.

This nurse is extremely educated in the field and has described some extensive training without seeming arrogant. If your highest level of education is an R.N., this is perfectly acceptable. You may want to consider continuing your education at some point, however.

Q: Who do you think are particularly important nurses in the medical industry?
A: My personal role models are Virginia Henderson, who started the first nursing index, and Florence Nightingale and Martha Rogers, the two most important nursing theorists. These women have set important standards for the industry and have made the profession what it is today.

This answer is commendable. The nursing candidate has knowledge of the industry and, furthermore, has chosen excellent role models. Read about current industry greats in nursing journals, or take a history-of-nursing class at your local community college.

Q: Why did you want to be a nurse?
A: My mother was a nurse because, in her day, it was one of the few options open to women. I decided I wanted to be a nurse from an early age because, of all
the careers open to women today, it's the job in which I can make the biggest contribution.

This candidate's answer shows a commitment to the profession. The recruiter is looking for serious nursing candidates only—those who are making a career of it. Think about why you're taking the interview and about why you're in nursing at all. Be able to articulate these ideas clearly to the recruiter.

Q: What nursing publications do you read?
A: On a regular basis, I read the American Journal of Nursing and Nursing 96. I also believe it's important for nurses to remain aware of what's going on outside of our profession, so I skim through the Wall Street Journal every day.

Your answer should be something similar to this candidate's. The recruiter is looking for someone who's always trying to keep his or her knowledge and skill level up to date. In an industry where technology is always changing, it's important to keep extremely aware of the profession.

Q: What do you think about managed care?
A: I think it's an important development in nursing. People are spending less time in the hospital, which is positive for the patient. And it keeps the rising costs of the health-care industry in check.

The recruiter wants to be sure that you're aware of current trends in the nursing and medical profession. This nursing candidate's answer is exemplary because he or she is aware of changes in the medical profession and is not resistant to that change. Be prepared for inevitable questions like this by reading current nursing journals.

Q: Do you think high technology will play an increasingly important role in the medical industry in the future?
A: It absolutely will. Information technology will mean to nurses that they'll be able to care for their patients more quickly and efficiently. I think high technology has already played an enormous role in the efficiency of the medical industry. The laser used for surgery is a very good example of this.

Career Changers: You should have your goals clearly in mind. Be able to articulate what it is that you want. If you're making a change, be able to explain why. You need to be able to sell yourself to the organization. Obviously, the more experience you have, the more desirable you are. At the very least you'll have to take some preparatory classes at your local community college.

The recruiter wants to see that this nursing candidate has a big-picture perspective of the industry. The candidate's answer is excellent because it demonstrates an understanding of the scope and impact of technology in the medical industry, and even provides an example. The importance of reading nursing publications cannot be stressed enough.

Q: Do you see much opportunity in health care in the future?
A: I think that because the industry is changing so dramatically, there will be plenty of opportunity. Drastic change always creates opportunity. For example, doctors will probably spend 80 percent less time in hospitals, so more nurses will be needed to staff the hospital.

This candidate's answer is good and is what the recruiter expects. The recruiter wants to be sure that the nursing candidate does not exist in a vacuum. Understanding the direction that health care, and thus nursing, is taking is essential.

Q: What do you think is the greatest problem with the way hospitals are run today?
A: Hospitals are extremely understaffed. The result is that we are not able to give as good a quality of care to our patients as we might.

The recruiter wants to be sure that the candidate is aware of industry standards, and at the same time is asking, "What frustrates you most about your job?" This candidate's answer shows genuine concern about the profession. The recruiter is not looking here for personal concerns about the job seeker's current position—like not getting enough vacation time, for example.

Q: What would you do if you found a friend and coworker stealing medical supplies?
A: That would be an awful position to be in. I'd immediately go to my supervisor once I was sure I knew what was really happening.

Experienced Professionals: You should have a good idea of what your overall goals are for the remainder of your career. Concerning the job you're interviewing for, however, you should be flexible in terms of where you want to work and what hours. Don't walk in and say, "No nights or weekends," for example. Know that it's possible to get a job, but it may not be the perfect job the first time you walk in the door. Flexibility to work in more than one setting, such as willingness to work in the SICU (surgical intensive care unit) and the MICU (medical intensive care unit) as you're needed, is also attractive to recruiters. However, your experience is the biggest thing you have going for you, and it will mean a lot in the interview.
This question is designed to determine the candidate's morals and ethics. This nursing candidate handles the situation correctly. It's also significant that he or she expresses remorse for the situation rather than enjoying power over a colleague.

Q: What is your biggest priority as a nurse?
A: Tending to my patients has always been my biggest priority. I also really try to make the patient's family feel as comfortable as possible.

It's important that you give an answer similar to this. The recruiter always wants to hear you talk about your patients first. A bad answer would be something like, "advancing my career."

Q: Have you read any fiction set in the medical profession?
A: I've read the novel The English Patient by Michael Ondaatje. It made a big impression on me because a young woman becomes an ad hoc nurse with no training or supplies, simply because she's desperately needed by a burn patient. I try to read this book once a year because it inspires me and it reminds me of how important my job is.

The candidate's answer is very strong here. It certainly isn't necessary that you read medical fiction. The recruiter, however, would undoubtedly be impressed with such a genuine interest in the nursing profession.

Q: What do you do when you encounter nursing procedures that you're unfamiliar with?
A: I immediately see if the hospital offers any classes in the area. If not, I find a class at the local community college so that I can get up to speed.

Candidates Re-entering the Workforce: People who have been out of circulation for any length of time, especially more than three or four years, need to take refresher courses. Such classes are available in every community and are usually listed as refresher courses for nurses. This course work is essential because the technology and medications change so much. And patients in hospitals these days are pretty sick. So nurses really need to be as prepared as they can from the minute they walk in the door. Hospitals don't have time to do extensive training programs anymore. In fact, many hospitals won't even hire someone re-entering the profession if they haven't taken a refresher course. You may even have to get some kind of experience before working your way back into a career in nursing again.

The recruiter is determining how proactive the candidate is. The importance of continuing your nursing education as needed cannot be stressed enough. This answer demonstrates a strong "can-do" attitude, which is another plus.

Q: Do you prefer to spend most of your time working alone or with others?
A: One of the things I like the most about being a nurse is the constant interaction with other people.

Nursing is a team effort. You'll always be working with other nurses, as well as with doctors and hospital personnel. You will also, of course, be interacting a great deal with patients and their families. If you prefer to work alone, then you might want to become involved in another aspect of the medical profession instead, such as research.

Q: What is an HMO?
A: A health maintenance organization is a gatekeeper, so to speak. It's an efficient way of organizing a certain set of doctors for the company's health-insurance customers.

You should be aware of what an HMO is and how it works. This nursing candidate understands what an HMO is and has given a brief and acceptable answer.

Q: What would be your ideal nursing job?
A: I think I'd like to reach the next level of nurse management. I'd like to oversee a bigger clinic, with more interaction with the resident doctors.

This answer shows ambition and commitment to the profession, and is also realistic and appropriate. Carefully think about your answer to this question before the interview.

Q: Do you have any questions for me?
A: Yes. How many patients do you see on an average day? How do you structure the work day for maximum efficiency?

The recruiter will want to answer any questions you may have. You should be prepared with several intelligent, well-thought-out questions. Remember, though, that the interviewer will find it a real turnoff if, this early in the hiring process, you ask questions like, "Will I be able to leave on time every day?" or "How much vacation time will I get?"