How Healthcare Work Environments Influence Nurse Retention

■ Colleen F. Erenstein, BSN, RN, CCRN  ■  Ruth McCaffrey, DNP, ARNP,BC

The purpose of this literature review was to determine the effect of healthcare work environments on nurse retention. The studies comprising this review describe factors that contribute to unhealthy work environments and implicate them as significant factors influencing nurse retention. The themes identified by nurses for purposes of retention included a desire for autonomy, empowerment, and decision-making opportunities in the environments in which they work. KEY WORDS: empowerment, nurse autonomy, nurse retention, work environment


BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

A positive work environment is essential for the retention of nurses in acute care settings. According to Sullivan and Decker,¹ the healthcare work environment is affected by healthcare consumers, healthcare providers, economical conditions such as levels of reimbursement, technology, and regulations. Likewise, Cullen² identified 4 obstacles that impede a functioning healthcare system and lead to unhealthy work environments: multiple regulations, denying care to the uninsured, short staffing, and poor communication between and among professional colleagues. Lynn and Redman³ assert that unhealthy working environments cause dissatisfaction among nurses. Supportive literature by Kreitzer et al⁴ characterize unhealthy work environments as those with high levels of stress, high nurse-patient ratios, overwhelming physical demands, communication problems between nursing staff and other healthcare providers, and verbal and physical abuse. These unhealthy environmental factors are present in varying degrees in the nursing work environment and precipitate nursing job dissatisfaction and burnout.

One of the essential causes of the current nursing shortage in the United States is the dissatisfaction of nursing with the work environment. Shirey⁵ asserts that the United States will experience a shortage of 400,000 registered nurses by the year 2020. Buerhau et al⁶ assert that although stopgap measures such as older nurses returning to the workforce and recruitment of foreign nurses have eased the nursing shortage in some areas over time, it will become more intense and be a greater challenge for health policy makers and healthcare institutions. Cullen² correctly states that few professions other than nursing are routinely responsible for another person’s life and well-being on a daily basis. Caring for persons and improving healthcare are reasons why nursing is an attractive profession to many; however, it is also one of the inherent stressors within the profession. The stress of being responsible for the health and well-being of others causes nurses to require even further support in the working environment to offset stressors always present in the work that they do.

There are consequences from the nursing shortage that can affect the delivery of healthcare and the profession of nursing. McCauley⁷ asserts that there is continuing evidence that unsupportive and unhealthy environments contribute to medical errors and unsafe working conditions. Strachota et al⁸ point to the fact that retaining nurses is not only less disruptive to a system but also far less expensive. Furthermore, turnover adds to the already high levels of stress upon the remaining workforce since staff often need to “fill in” and participate in the orientation of new staff, resulting in an increased workload and, possibly, an increased level of stress.

Author Affiliation: Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida.

Corresponding Author: Ruth McCaffrey, DNP, ARNP,BC, Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing, Florida Atlantic University, 777 Glade Rd, Boca Raton, FL 33431 (rmccaffr@fau.edu).
DEFINING POSITIVE WORK ENVIRONMENTS FOR NURSES

Shirey states that healthy work environments are “supportive of the whole human being, are patient-focused and are joyful workplaces.”\(^5\)(p258) Shirey\(^5\) further asserts that healthy work environments promote the treatment of employees with fairness and respect, which promotes a culture of communication that, in turn, promotes and an environment of collaboration and trust.

National nursing organizations have begun efforts to address current negative aspects of healthcare work environments. The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses makes the case that nurses need respectful and safe environments that provide the structure within which they can optimize their nursing practice.\(^9\) The association developed a Healthy Work Environment Initiative, promoting work environments for nurses that will nurture and enhance their practice while providing a healing environment for their patients. Moreover, in 2005, the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses published 6 criteria that are necessary for a healthy work environment: communication, leadership, appropriate staffing, decision making, recognition, and collaboration.\(^10\)

This document asserts that nursing work and care environments must be safe, healing, humane, and respectful of the rights, responsibilities, needs, and contributions of all people including patients and their families and nurses. Similarly, in 2001, the American Association of Nurses developed the Bill of Rights for Registered Nurses, taking the position that nurses have the right to work in an environment that is both safe and supportive for them and their patients.\(^11\) While the Bill of Rights has not had a large impact on the nursing work environment to date, it is a document that could guide nurses in stressing the need for improved work environments within any individual healthcare setting.

The American Nurses Credentialing Center has proposed that there are forces of magnetism that improve the nursing work environment and encourage nurses to remain as experts in bedside care.\(^12\) When studied, Magnet hospitals exhibited improved nursing work environments in comparison with non-Magnet hospitals. In addition, there were identifiable improvements in work environment in hospitals during the pursuit of Magnet recognition.\(^13\)

Parameters for the following literature review included accessing the Ovid database using key terms such as nursing shortage (2883 articles), nurse retention (246 articles), and retention in nursing (135 articles). Articles chosen for inclusion were research studies that dealt with nurse retention in relation to the work environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To better understand the effects of job stress and social support among nurses in the work environment, AbuAlrRub\(^14\) conducted an Internet survey of 303 hospital nurses. Of the 2509 nurses contacted, 303 met the selection criteria, the key criterion being that the participant has been a staff nurse for at least 6 months. The sample consisted of 263 American hospital nurses and 40 non-American nurses. The mean age for the American and non-American nurses was 42.4 and 39.5 years, respectively.

A Web-based questionnaire included scales such as the Nursing Stress Scale,\(^15\) Schwirian Six Dimension Scale of Nursing Performance,\(^16\) and McCain Marklin Social Integration Scale,\(^14\) and demographic data were collected. Data from the questionnaire were examined to determine the correlation between coworker support and decreased job stress and job performance and stress.

Study results revealed that when nurses perceived that they had social support from coworkers and colleagues, they felt less job-related stress. Moreover, this supported the researcher’s hypothesis that when nurses believed colleagues supported them, they liked and performed better at their jobs. Additional findings related to the outcomes of prolonged stress included decreased job performance, burnout, and nursing shortages. In addition, the study revealed that even with minimal amounts of stress, as measured by the stress scale, job performance suffered, manifested by staff turnover, absenteeism, and decreased quality and quantity of patient care.

The study concluded that social support from coworkers was important and that social support and diminished level of stress were components in nurse retention. These findings also indicated that when administrators make change within their organizations, they provide a better environment and encourage teamwork within the nursing environments.

In a later supporting study regarding the nursing work environment, Geiger-Brown et al\(^17\) investigated common themes that nurses expressed regarding their work environment and how they viewed the impact of work on their personal health and well-being. Participants were randomly recruited through a mail
survey sent to 2000 nurses in New York and Illinois; 1428 responded (74%), of which 309 (28%) were deemed usable. Open-ended comments were then collected and transcribed verbatim. The researchers used constant comparative analysis to review raw data and identify themes, patterns, and meanings.

Major work environment themes identified by nurse participants included excessive demands such as long work hours, poor staffing, lack of support from coworkers, and lack of administrative advocacy, injustice, and unfairness. The nurse participants also compared nursing with other professions, highlighting the inequities in service professions, such as full retirement packages for police and teachers after 20 years of service. The nurse participants went on to describe their solution to the working environment including providing staff nurses with a voice to make decisions about the work environment and a willingness on the part of management to try new ideas that could improve the work environment. Seventy-five percent of respondents stated that they had no plans to work with management in implementing solutions. The work environment was so poor for some of the participants in the survey that they felt that the only solution was to quit the job or the profession.

Geiger-Brown et al\textsuperscript{17} also looked at how nursing participants viewed their health and well-being. Nurses described the physical and emotional impact that nursing had on them, including feeling drained to the point that their personal lives suffered. An example of a participant’s response in Geiger-Brown et al states, “I feel I may need to change jobs soon because I will physically be unable to do the work.”\textsuperscript{17(p5)} In addition, physical ailments and injuries from work demands influenced longevity in the nursing profession. One respondent commented, “I love my job in nursing... but I never realized how physical and emotional the job really is.”\textsuperscript{17(p22)} This study identified recommendations on how to improve nurse retention and the nurses’ health and well-being including increasing workplace safety, continuously evaluating compensation levels, and focusing on retention measures by administrators. The administrator role in this study is congruent with the study by AbuAlRub\textsuperscript{14} and Geiger-Brown et al\textsuperscript{17} regarding the role of administrators in the healthcare environment. These administrators work with and support nursing staff to improve healthcare work environments.

Atencio et al\textsuperscript{19} examined the nurse’s perception of work pressure and autonomy. A total of 692 questionnaires were distributed; 37% were completed and returned, yielding a sample of 257 acute care nurses working in a tertiary hospital in California. Demographics of the sample included 245 women and 12 men, with an average age of 40 years or older (73.1%). Most participants (70%) either had worked or were currently working as a charge nurse and worked longer than 6 years as nurse (78.2%).

The researchers initially surveyed the subjects, and then followed up every 6 months for 24 months. The instruments utilized were a demographic and
background characteristics tool and a self-administered Insel and Moos Environment Scale, a valid and reliable instrument.

The study concluded that positive perceptions of work environment are vital in improving job satisfaction, retaining nurses, and decreasing turnover. Data revealed that nurses with less than 5 years of experience felt greater autonomy than those with more experience. Autonomy was defined as independence to make decisions and the ability to take initiatives in nursing practice. Researchers recommended that if administrators positively influenced work environments by promoting trust and empowerment, the improved work environment would increase nurse retention and improve patient outcomes. This recommendation correlates with preceding studies and points to the importance of the administrator’s role in supporting the nurse in the work environment.

The study by Smith et al²⁰ investigated the work environment and what likely affects job satisfaction and nursing turnover. A sample of 62 nurse participants was randomly selected from a list of full-time employed nurses. The 62 nurses agreed to participate in interviews. The nurse participants were assigned a numerical code to protect their identities. The sample was composed of 56 women (90.3%) and 6 men (9.7%), with demographics that included an average age of 45.1 years and 3.8 years of employment at their current employers.

A professional interviewer using descriptive in-depth interviews conducted the study in an academic hospital setting. The nurse participants were asked to describe their satisfaction with their work environment and with management. Findings of this research are similar to the study of Ray et al¹⁸ in that both studies confirmed the importance of creating a practice environment that both enables nurses to meet their professional expectations and supports their beliefs in the support of management while improving their organizational commitment. The study concluded that job satisfaction is linked to retention and that creating a satisfactory work environment supports an increased level of loyalty to the employer.

DISCUSSION

A critical issue identified in this literature review was the need for healthcare leaders and administrators to construct a partnership with nurses in order to build an environment of trust and support that will enhance nursing practice. While it appears that that administrators desire nurses to communicate and be decision makers, nurses felt that administrators were not accessible enough to build effective communication skills. It is obvious then that there is a need for dialogue between healthcare administrators and nurses concerning the needs of each to create an environment where nurses can act as professional care providers, which will benefit both the healthcare institution and patients. Data show that hospitals attempting to attain Magnet status or those already have Magnet status have begun this dialogue and have reaped the rewards in nursing job satisfaction and improved patient care.

Future studies should be aimed at understanding why nurses are to act in a more united fashion to solve their own problems and why more healthcare institutions do not undertake an open dialogue with nurses to improve the nursing work environment. Another area for study is to understand the perception of hospital administrators of nurses and the work environment, and how these perceptions influence the way nurses are treated and respected.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This literature review identifies the positive and negative implications of healthy work environments for nursing practice and healthcare delivery. Improvement of the work environment can influence morale, job satisfaction, patient outcomes, and the retention of professional nurses. In addition, nurses can resolve their individual problems within their work environment when administration and management promote autonomy and empowerment for nursing professionals. To attract persons to the profession of nursing with its inherent stressors, demands, expectations, and responsibilities, an overhaul of compensation benefits needs to be examined.

CONCLUSION

The studies in this literature review reveal nurses’ insight on how work environment influences nurse retention. The studies describe issues that contribute to the nursing shortage; for example, job stress, excessive demands, poor staffing, physical demands, and lack of respect. On the contrary, the nurse participants identified solutions that if endorsed by administrators would increase autonomy and forge a partnership to effect change in the healthcare environment. When
working conditions improve, nurses by their inherent contributions can focus on the most important aspect of their profession—patient care.

REFERENCES