

Strategies to Retain Nurses and Prevent Turnover

Elizabeth Cooper

Granite State College

Professor Kelly Grady

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Nurse retention is defined as “keeping nurses at their jobs” (Bertagna, 2022, 1). Nurse retention could include stress management skills, improved nurse to patient ratios, leadership involvement, and empowerment. The cost of nurse retention in the current climate can pose challenge. In considering nursing retention in the hospital setting, stress management techniques and nurse empowerment can reduce the cost of training new nurses causing a decrease in nursing turnover and staffing shortages, as well as increased patient care and satisfaction. Nurse Retention is cost effective in training cost verse stress management and empowerment techniques.

Background

Nurse job satisfaction is related to nurse retention, and currently, the healthcare industry is facing "The Great Resignation." “The Great Resignation” was a term coined for the vast amount of healthcare staff leaving the field during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fry, 2022). Prior to early 2020 there was a decline in the number of nurses, physicians and allied health professionals (Fry, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic added strain to an already strained work force, it is estimated that 1 in 5 nurses left the bedside or retired during the pandemic (Fry, 2022).

Different parts of the country experienced differing struggles during COVID-19. While some areas were laying off nurses and healthcare staff, other states could not fill the holes needed in the workforce (Chan, 2021). Fields such as surgical, orthopedics and other specialties were no longer performing elective surgeries, this caused their census to drop dramatically for months after the pandemic began (Chan, 2021). Leading to the lay off of many specialized nurses. Additionally, the initial lack of PPE or personal protective equipment led many nurses to retire, resign or leave the profession all together, thus

increasing the strain on the workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light many underlying issues in staffing and new issues that were not felt prior, nurse retention can assist to resolve some of these issues. Focusing on tracking, trending, funding and creating interventions to support the nurse workforce should start during the pandemic and while in the recovery phase (Chan, 2021).

The public health crisis exacerbated chronic issues nursing has faced in the past few decades including, high amounts of turnover, absenteeism, sick leaves, heavy workloads and unsafe patient ratios (Lavoie-Trembly, 2021). Prior to the pandemic 20% of nurses expressed a desire to leave, in 2021 the average raised to 36% (Lavoie-Trembly, 2021). Nurses intention to leave their jobs were influenced by psychological stress and job dissatisfaction within the work environment (Lavoie-Trembly, 2021). Poor work environments are characterized as having heavy workloads, increased emotional demands and a high-level of work–life interference, factors magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic (Lavoie-Trembly, 2021).

According to the American Association of Critical Care Nurses there are six standards of excellence needed for a healthy work environment (AACN, 2021). These include skilled communication (being able to communicate as well as any other nurse skill), true collaboration (fostering an environment of collaborating together), effective decision making (directing clinical care, making policy and leading staff), appropriate staffing (matching patient needs with nurse ratios), meaningful recognition (recognizing staff for the work they do), and authentic leadership (being an example of a healthy work environment) (AACN , 2021). When the six standards listed above are utilized 26% fewer nurses intend to leave their job and 36% fewer nurses experience moral distress (AACN, 2021). After implementation of

the six standards 44% of nurses reported better staffing on their units and 84% reported better overall patient satisfaction (AACN, 2021).

The stakeholders included the managers, CEOs, nurses, patients, and ancillary healthcare staff at the local hospital. If managers could participate in retaining staff, there would be less time spent training and orienting new staff. The CEO's benefit by decrease cost with hospital wide training and orienting new nurses. Nurses feel empowered and confident in their roles as nurses. Patient satisfaction increases and better care is performed. Ancillary staff have a decreased strain, and work load.

Significance

Looking at the current nurse workforce, there are a growing numbers of nurses leaving the profession. Within the first year 17-30% of new nurses leave the field, 56% in the second year (Bertagna, 2022). Another estimated 20% left due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bertagna, 2022). Out of those nurses who quit or left the industry as a nurse the top reasons include retirement, burnout, vaccine mandates, family member needs, higher education, mental health, staffing shortages and pay (Bertagna, 2022). Many hospitals and healthcare facilities required vaccination in order to continue working in healthcare. These restrictions led a growing number of nurses to leave the workforce or were fired for lacking vaccination (Bertagna, 2022). This continued to put a strain on the nurse workforce during the pandemic. When it comes to higher education, there is a growing number of facilities, especially specialty care, requiring a bachelors degree or higher in order to apply for the position. This increase in education, leaves nurses to retire or go back to school. Looking at these reasons give us an idea of how we can work to retain and keep nurses in the field prior to leaving.

New Hampshire hospitals were facing similar challenges experiencing nurse shortages and needing a plan for nurse retention. New Hampshire is 10th on the list for the most severe

shortages, with a gap of 1,100 nurses when looking at supply and demand (Greenwood, 2022). Nurses are the fifth most in demand job (Greenwood, 2022). However, nurses state a lack of pay is a factor in staying at a job long term (Bertagna, 2022). New Hampshire sits in the middle in terms of average wages, resting at between \$69-73,000 per year (US Labor Statistics, 2022).

Patient satisfaction and safety were in decline during the COVID-19 pandemic. Press Ganey scores show an overall decline in both safety and satisfaction (Fiesel, 2021). Increase numbers were shown in falls, pressure ulcers and central line associated infections (Fiesel, 2021). A reversal in harm rates is showing, as scores prior to the pandemic were improving (Fiesel, 2021). “Hospitals are in survival mode because of the virus, and this has driven unprecedented levels of burnout, turnover and staffing gaps,” said Jeff Doucette, chief nursing officer, Press Ganey. “Our healthcare workers must give their energy and almost singular focus to COVID-19, and the ripple effect has exacerbated safety lapses and drift in hospitals.” Surveying seven different types of nursing units, safety concerns increased across the board according to Press Ganey, something nurse retention could work to resolve.

Nurse retention is a cost effective approach to staff shortages. In a non-economic and economic study of nurse turnover, the findings showed that continued nurse turnover was costly (Bae, 2022). The cost calculated 21,514 to 88,000 in the USA per nurse (Bae, 2022). The cost calculated to replace a nurse was 1.2 to 1.3 times the average salary for a nurse (Bae, 2022). Another study estimated that a nurse retention program would benefit the hospital by reduction in advertisement and recruitment costs, fewer vacancies and reduction in vacancy costs, fewer new hires and reduction in hiring costs, fewer orientees and reduced orientation and training costs, maintained or increased productivity, fewer terminations and

reduction in termination costs, decreased patient errors and increased quality of care improved work environment and culture, increased satisfaction, increased trust and accountability, preserve organizational knowledge, and easier nurse recruitment (Jones, 2007). These benefits would save the hospital hundreds of dollars by retaining the nurse force already working in the hospital.

Objectives

The overall goal of this project was to develop support for nurse retention amid burnout, as described by staff. To accomplish this goal, my first objective was to assess the effects of burnout among nurses. Steps to reach this goal included: (1) the assessment of burnout on one medical surgical unit of a NH community hospital, (2) analyzed best practices for burnout and retention, (3) collaboration with nurse leaders, (4) consultation with nurse retentionist, (5) the development of staff education about stress management and (6) plans for the development of a quiet space on the unit for nurses.

Implementation

In collaboration with Unit managers of a medical surgical unit at a NH community hospital, a survey was developed and administered to 15 staff nurses. In collaboration with nurse leaders, survey questions were written to assess nurse burnout on the unit and the opportunities to increase nurse retention. The goal of the survey was to provide additional information and formulate implementation strategies to better retain nurses on that unit.

Discussion with the leaders revealed that they had great concerns about burnout and turnover in the post-COVID era. A small convenience sample of nurses, with years at the hospital ranging from 1-10, from a 35 bed medical surgical unit of a local New Hampshire hospital. Survey questions included (1) "Are you happy with your current work

environment?” (2) “What addition to your daily practice would increase the likelihood you would stay at your job?”; (3) Do you have additional suggestions for ways to retain staff in healthcare?, if you could change one aspect of your job what would it be?”, (4) Do you believe staff retention is an issue in healthcare? (5) How many years have you been at your current position? (6) If you had a friend in high school that wanted to be a nurse, what would you say to them? These questions were formulated and responded to by email for collaboration purposes.

The survey answers gave a variety of unique insights into the ways we can retain nurses in healthcare. 8/10 nurses stated they were somewhat happy at their job. 5/10 stated scheduled breaks would increase job satisfaction, 3/10 stated managerial support and 2/10 stated increase patient satisfaction. Additional suggestions for retaining staff included increased support in work environment, better pay and better staff to patient ratios. The aspects of their jobs the nurses wished to change included nurse -to-patient ratios, lack of support, ability to take scheduled breaks and increased patient satisfaction. All surveyed felt staff retention is an issue in healthcare. Lastly, “would nurses recommend their friends and family also become nurses?” The answers were split down the middle, half giving positive answers such as “go for it” and “we need people like you.” The other five nurses gave answers to dissuade the friend from pursuing a career in nursing.

After collaborating with other professional nurses, education strategies and a plan was developed. Education would include stress management strategies, such as deep breathing, gratitude and mindfulness. Education would happen during daily meetings as well as additional classes that may be attended in off work hours. Education to staff and nurse managers on the role of the nurse retentionist, and ways to maintain nursing staff.

One additional idea - a quiet space for reflection on the unit – was also discussed with nurse managers. Though this has not been accomplished yet, the plans included adjusting the break room space to provide an additional area for quiet reflection and mindfulness practices. This space would reside next to the break room and be a quiet space without chatter or meal prep. This area would be used for the stress management techniques discussed in the daily meetings.

Recommendations

Based on my assessment of evidence based nurse retention strategies, and in alignment with unit leaders, a number of recommendations were developed to accomplish the project goal of retaining nurses in their work environments. Integrating nurse retention strategies, with the hire of a nurse retentionist and also by giving nurse managers some tangible tools was a first consideration. Stress management interventions, including some education about deep breathing, mindfulness, gratitude and a quiet reflection space for staff on the unit were also recommended.

Nurse Retentionist

The first recommendation is the development of a Nurse Retentionist role in the facility. The nurse retentionist would be responsible for reinforcing the importance of continuing to empower nurses in the field to stay at their jobs (Oct. 14, 2022). The Nurse Retentionist role is to partner with nurse leaders, reduce the burden on our nurse leaders to be retention experts, collaborate with Human Resources, Nurse Educators, Nursing Leaders and Nursing Staff to develop and implement evidenced based nurse retention and recognition strategies (Sattler, 2021). This is a valuable connection between stakeholders, collaborating together. See Appendix A for a sample job description of a Nurse Retentionist.

This role was an unexpected discovery of this project. There is a growing body of evidence about the importance of a nurse retentionist. After hiring a Nurse Retentionist at southeastern hospital in the United States, 77 nurses were retained that had prior intention to leave (Sattler, 2021). Nurse turnover dropped to 11.8% with the retention of 254 nurses (Sattler, 2021). The financial impact is estimated at 22,860,000 over two years, using the estimated 90,000 in cost of replacing a nurse (Sattler, 2021). A Nurse Retentionist can play a significant role in cost reduction and bridging the gap between nurses, leaders, executives and ancillary staff.

Education

The next recommendation -is to educate the nurse managers running the morning meetings on stress management techniques. The three techniques to focus on would be deep breathing/meditation, gratefulness and mindfulness. See appendix B for sample educational handouts to display. Managers would be expected to be knowledgeable in the stress management skills in order to teach others.

Managers and nurse leaders on the floor could implement daily check ins with the staff prior to the start of shift. This meeting would review concerns for the day, difficult patients, discuss the needs of the floor for staffing and ways to resolve the problems. Continued surveys would be posted after each implementation phase to gauge results. During this morning meeting, staff breaks would be scheduled, managers would fill in for nurses during breaks if needed depending on staffing. A small portion of the meeting would focus on staff recognition and commending specific staff for the work they provide and educating staff on stress management techniques.

In alignment with the American Association of Critical Care Nurses (AACN) Healthy Work Environment, morning meetings with managerial support would work to implement

skilled communication, appropriate staffing, true collaboration, authentic leadership and meaningful recognition (ACCN, 2021). Morning meetings empower nurses to make evidence based decision making and feel confident in their role in the hospital. The morning meeting would be broken down as follows: Staffing review and making adjustments to nurse ratios as needed, discuss difficult patients and brainstorm ways to improve care, review safety concerns and collaborate on resolving any safety needs and recognize staff achievements and validate their concerns.

Quiet Space

The final recommendation is to create a quiet space or area for nurses and healthcare staff to go to practice the stress management skills. On the medical surgical unit of the small hospital in NH there is an entire unit that is closed due to low staffing. One of the rooms on the unit could be transformed into a quiet space. This would include low music, curtains maintain minimal light, comfortable seating and copies of the stress management handouts displayed for staff use.

In a hospital setting, stress management techniques such as mindfulness were found to be beneficial for nurses. Among the nurses that participated in the survey, the stress management skills of mindfulness were helpful in reducing work related anxiety (Cohen-Katz, 2005). Stress management skills can assist nurses to continue to work at their jobs longer and stay within the hospital. Combined with education, a quiet space and a nurse retentionist staff hospitals can retain nurses in healthcare.

After careful consideration and review of the project findings, recommendation would be made to complete the goals of the project. First to hire on board a nurse retentionist, someone to continue to develop ideas for retaining nurses long term and work side by side with the nurses. Next, to educate staff on stress management techniques such as deep

breathing, mindfulness and gratitude. Finally, convert a room on the unit, separate from meal prep and chatter for the healthcare staff to use to practice stress management techniques.

These three strategies can work to retain nurses long term, in the healthcare field. Saving the hospital time, stress and resources hiring new nurses from consistent turnover.

Lessons were learned as the project developed and moved forward. Challenges arose for time management and obtaining the needed information to complete the project. With busy schedules, Unit managers were not able to relay the information in the time needed. For future projects I would begin reaching out to management and staff earlier in the project in the hopes of getting better responses. Additionally, surveys could have been sent to more staff in the hospital in order to obtain a wider variety of search results and answers. This was difficult as surveys were sent through the management team at the hospital and was not in my direct control. Overall, the project showed the vast difference that can be made to empower nurses at their jobs, thus retaining the healthcare field for the future to come.

Appendix A

Sample Job Description Of A Nurse Retentionist

Essential Job Functions

- Establish and direct the implementation of sustainable processes and guidelines to promote the retention of a multigenerational clinical workforce.
 - Manage and monitor unit/department-level and organization-wide turnover data, working with leaders to develop targeted action plans as needed.
 - Identify, research, and implement best practice and innovative retention efforts.
 - Partner with department leaders and key stakeholders to identify strategies to retain clinical staff.
 - Measure and evaluate the impact and ROI of development programs and interventions.
- Develop and implement clinical staff mentorship opportunities.
 - Design and develop succession planning processes and curriculum for organization-wide mentor development to accelerate growth of the current and future leader successor talent pools and address critical development needs.
 - Collaborate with leadership for clinical coaching interventions.
- Work collaboratively with others to optimize employee engagement, recognition, and retention.
 - Establish working relationship with Human Resources to understand and improve staff engagement and ensure utilization of wellbeing programs to enhance resilience.

- Serve as an advisor, leadership sponsor, or consultant to the organizational Culture Council in assessing and promoting a healthy work environment and planning and administrating staff recognition programs, including nurses' week activities.
- Partner with Human Resources to enhance nurse recruitment efforts.
 - Communicate with nurse applicants as needed to answer questions in a timely manner.
 - Participate in job fairs and recruitment events.
 - Establish and maintain relationships with local and regional schools of nursing and healthcare educational programs.

Appendix B

Stress Management Educational Handout

Deep Breathing Strategies

First, take a normal breath. Then try a deep breath: Breathe in slowly through your nose, allowing your chest and lower belly to rise as you fill your lungs. Let your abdomen expand fully. Now breathe out slowly through your mouth. Repeat five times, relaxing more with each breath.

Practicing Gratitude

To affirm the good things in your life

Acknowledge the good things others have done for you

1. Start by being observant
2. Pick just one interaction a day

Other ways to practice gratitude include:

Keeping a journal

Share with others

Remember the bad

Ask three questions: “What have I received from ___?”, “What have I given to ___?”, and “What troubles and difficulty have I caused?”

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a way of thinking, perceiving and behaving

1. Make the time
 2. Practice an exercise
- Body scan: During the body scan exercise, try to focus inwardly on your body and the way that it feels. Breathe deeply, and remain aware of your bodily sensations without trying to change them.
 - Three-minute breathing: Focus attention on breathing, and extend attention. Focusing on one's breath is meant to act as an anchor.
 - Mindful stretching: While in the stretch, focus on your breathing, and think about how your body feels. Try to focus only on the activity of stretching and avoid other distracting thoughts.
 - Mindful breathing while focusing on your breath: Sit somewhere quiet in a seated position. While seated, focus on your breathing. Inhale deeply for three seconds and slowly exhale for three seconds. Use your breath as your anchor; when you find your thoughts wandering, come back to your breath and inhale deeply for three seconds, followed by a deep exhalation for three seconds.
 - Mindful meditation: During this type of meditation, you will be seated for 10–30 minutes and practice focusing on only your breathing.

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