The First Years of Work in the Nursing Profession: Integration, Challenges, and Retention

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Abstract

Background

Nursing is a key component of every health system. In Israel, there are 7.1 nurses per 1,000 population, and 5.4 employed nurses per 1,000 population, compared with an average of 9.2 in OECD countries. These figures reflect a workforce shortage due, among other factors, to growing demand for health services, population aging, and nurses leaving the profession.

Nurse attrition entails recruitment and training costs, increases the burden on remaining staff, and may undermine continuity and quality of care. The literature indicates that early in their careers, nurses are at increased risk of leaving the profession because of workload, burnout, pay, and employment conditions, lack of support, difficulty balancing work and personal life, and a gap between expectations and professional reality.

The Nursing Administration at the Ministry of Health commissioned the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to examine attrition among nurses with limited work experience.

Objective

To estimate the extent of attrition among nurses during their first five years of work, identify the factors that influence it, and propose ways of addressing it that are particularly relevant to Israel.

Methods

The study was conducted between August 2023 and July 2024, using mixed methods: an online survey and 32 in-depth interviews. The survey was administered to 18,485 nurses who received their nursing licenses between 2017 and 2023. After screening for incomplete forms and other issues, 1,858 questionnaires were retained (11% of the study population).

The questionnaire was developed specifically for this study, based on previous instruments. It included questions on background characteristics, training,

employment, satisfaction, burnout, attitudes toward the profession, and reasons for leaving. Respondents followed different question paths according to whether they were employed in the profession at the time of survey.

Interviews were conducted with eight senior health system officials and managers and 24 nurses. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to represent nurses working in the profession, nurses considering leaving it, and nurses who already had. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically.

Survey data were analyzed in SPSS using χ^2 tests, t-tests, and logistic regression. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute.

Findings

Attrition Scope and Timing

At the time of survey, 87% of nurses were employed in the profession; 5% were looking for work with the intent of returning to the profession, and 7% had left it without intending to return. Among the latter, 56% had left the profession within two years of obtaining their license, and 58% had done so within approximately two years of starting work.

These findings place the focus of nurse retention on entry into the profession, from licensing through the first years of work.

Satisfaction with the Profession and Workplace

Among nurses employed at the time of survey, 63% reported high satisfaction with the profession, and 47% reported high satisfaction with their workplace.

The main factors cited as influencing nurses to remain employed in nursing were love of and pride in the profession (78% of respondents), interest in the profession (76%), sense of fulfillment (72%), relationships with patients (70%), and sense of mission (63%). Opportunities for advancement and earning potential were cited less often, by 28% and 33%, respectively.

Reasons for Leaving

Among those who had left the profession, 51% cited low pay, 50% cited their immediate supervisor's attitude toward them, 48% cited workload, 32% cited burnout, and 32% cited the gap between actual work and expectations.

Among those employed at the time of survey, satisfaction was particularly low with pay (22%) and workload (31%).

Team and Manager Relations as Factors Affecting Retention

A pleasant team atmosphere was cited by 69% of respondents as affecting their decision to remain in the workplace, and the attitude of their immediate supervisor was cited by 67%. In the interviews, the team was described as an anchor that helps staff cope with workload, and an attentive and flexible manager was described as someone who "sees the employee." Conversely, interviewees described a humiliating attitude, lack of support, and a sense of being "just another cog in the system" as factors contributing to their decision to leave.

Leaving as a Process

Interviewees described a physical workload that sometimes prevented them from taking breaks to eat, drink, or use the restroom, alongside difficulty with work-life balance. When these difficulties were not addressed within the workplace, they gradually led to transfers to another department or organization and, in some cases, to leaving the profession.

Discussion

The study indicates that attrition in the first years of a nursing career is relatively low: 87% of nurses continued working in the profession, whereas 7% had left and did not intend to return. However, the high attrition rates around entry into the profession indicate that this is a sensitive stage in which nurses' self-efficacy, belonging, and commitment to the profession take shape.

The findings show that attrition is usually not due to rejection of the profession itself, but rather to the accumulation of difficulties related to workload, low pay, poor management, and the gap between expectations and reality. Therefore, retaining nurses requires continuous support throughout the transition to employment,

the integration process, and establishment in the profession through mentoring, supportive management, teamwork, employment flexibility, and opportunities for professional development.

Recommendations

1. Focus retention efforts on the first years of work and strengthen integration and support processes.
2. Strengthen the quality of direct management and establish a respectful and supportive work environment.
3. Examine ways to reduce workload and improve employment conditions that support retention.
4. Expand opportunities for professional development and create clear career prospects within the nursing profession.
5. Enable greater mobility within the profession as an alternative to leaving it.