

FUTURE EMERGENCY NURSING WORKFORCE: WHAT THE EVIDENCE IS TELLING US



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Contribution to Emergency Nursing Practice

- The current literature on the international emergency-nursing workforce indicates that there are chronic shortages and increasing difficulty in recruitment.
- This article demonstrates that there is no consistent strategy for driving recruitment and retention.
- Key implications for emergency nursing practice in this article are that if we do not find a way to engage positively with the next generation of nursing workforce, and develop strategies to increase longevity, these chronic shortages will become critical.

Abstract

Introduction: In Australia, on any given day, there are more than 300 advertised emergency nursing positions, and this situation can be replicated in nearly every country internationally. The nursing shortage globally is known. The importance of not only why nurses specialize in the field of emergency nursing but also why they remain in the field requires an understanding of the evidence and research into nursing recruitment and retention. Leadership within the emergency department has a strong

correlation to staff retention. It is hoped that, by gaining a greater understanding of the elements that influence staff retention, we will be able to lay down a strong foundation for the future of emergency nursing.

Methods: This literature review used a bibliographic search as well as the author's own experience.

Results: This article presents the key factors that have impact on emergency nursing retention: workplace environment, demands on emergency nurses, resilience, and education and training.

Discussion: Emergency nursing recruitment and retention is a multifaceted issue that requires urgent attention to develop tools and strategies to support organizations to build a sustainable workforce. This literature review has highlighted the need for further studies to understand why emergency nurses lack the knowledge or capability for a long-term career in emergency nursing.

Key words: Emergency nurse; Retention; Job satisfaction; Leadership

Introduction

The global nursing shortage is not a new phenomenon, and the literature has been predicting the mismatch in nursing service provision and service demand since early in the 21st

century.¹ Specialty areas, such as emergency nursing, will not be spared these gross shortages.² There appear to be many aspects of the evolving role of an emergency nurse that may have impact on both recruitment and retention.³ This is also compounded by an unprecedented growth in ED presentations that are extending beyond expectations.⁴ The evidence is clear through reporting mechanisms globally that the emergency department is bearing the burden of disease and an aging population, with other predictions that will affect emergency care, so that by 2030 road traffic accidents will account for one of the highest causes of death in the developed world.⁵ If the United Nations believes that there is a need for sustainable development goals to strengthen emergency care, emergency nursing organizations need also to respond to a model of sustainability internationally.

The review of the literature, for the purpose of this article, was to gather evidence around our current

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understanding of this global issue among emergency nurses and provide guidance for our next steps.

Methods

The data presented in this review are from secondary sources through a bibliographic literature search. The general goal of any literature review is to gather knowledge that may influence further studies to improve nursing and is a crucial step for researchers.⁶

An electronic search of the literature was performed using the keywords *emergency nurse, retention, recruitment, and staff satisfaction*. To ensure international capture of the literature, databases including Pubmed, MEDLINE, and the Cochrane Library were searched with the same parameters, and key words were reviewed to exclude local bias. Only peer-reviewed journals were accessed with the following criteria: published between 2002 and 2018, available in English, and full text. The Joanne Briggs Institute (JBI) model of evidence was the most appropriate model for this literature search, as this complex issue is predominantly based on qualitative research.⁷

Results

Of the literature searched, 29 articles were included in this review, with studies presented from Australia, United States, Canada, Thailand, South Africa, Italy, and the United Kingdom. All met the inclusion criteria that were previously established.

WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

Throughout many of the studies, there remained a theme of how the current emergency department environment affects emergency nursing retention.³ It has been acknowledged previously that globally emergency presentations continue to rise, and with that is the demand for resources and, in particular, the pressures placed on emergency nurses as a workforce resource.⁸ The emergency environment is unique; unlike other hospital workplaces, there are no limits or caps placed on patient numbers. There is an increasing burden of patients with complex diseases, increasing levels of violence, overcrowding, patient boarding, all added to the increasing pressure to improve patient satisfaction.^{3,9} The issues surrounding increasing violence in the emergency department make for a hostile work environment and must be considered a contributing factor for the problems

in recruitment of new emergency nurses and retention of even the most seasoned emergency nurses.¹⁰ Even with countermeasures, such as security and risk screening in place, workplace violence and direct violence against emergency workers has now become the norm.¹¹

Within the emergency department, there are many high-demand functions that contribute to workplace stress such as triage, resuscitative care, interventions, and meeting patient expectations.⁹ Although most emergency nurses love the nature of this unpredictable work environment, it does make them more susceptible to the symptoms of occupational stress. When there is a mismatch in the job demand, the control they have over those demands, and the support networks in place, studies have shown an increased susceptibility to occupational stress, which, in turn, affects the retention of emergency nurses.¹² Is the environment so different from what it was 20 years ago? Anecdotally, most emergency nurses would say yes.

There is an idiom often used in emergency departments of “working in the trenches,” which invokes a sense that the emergency department is like a war zone.¹³ Maybe the work environment is something that is not in the control of most ED nurses, in that we cannot control the acuity or the activity of the day, but if the aim is to improve recruitment and retention, we need to understand what we can control. In the work environment, we can control the support systems put in place so that the “war zones” do not feel like boot camp for new recruits. In interviews and surveys by Winters¹³ and Morphett et al,⁹ respectively, although conducted in 2 separate countries, a similar result was concluded with respect to support systems in place for emergency nurses. The conclusion is that it varies from emergency department to emergency department, state to state. There is not a single consensus on strategies for supporting nurses in the workplace; some research discusses the importance of education and the level of training required to gain employment in the emergency department, others discuss the important role of the nurse unit manager in promoting a positive workplace culture. Another study importantly highlighted the support network among nurses and, in particular, why emergency nurses tend to “eat their young.”¹⁴ Has the workplace environment of the emergency department become such that there is a lack of empathy and collegiality? Should ED nurses receive extra training in preceptorship and mentorship?^{13,15}

DEMANDS ON EMERGENCY NURSES

“You’re a professional 24 hours a day, 7 days per week, whether you’re working or not.”¹⁶ There are many demands placed upon emergency nursing around the world, with

most studies reporting a similar theme of the pressures of the emergency department.^{3,8,10,12,13} We have discussed the work environment, but there are other demands placed upon ED nurses. This is a multifaceted problem that is not always under the control of the individual nurse.

First, is the nursing shortage reported in the reviewed literature. For emergency nurses, this places increasing demands on workload, as they are pushed to increase nurse-to-patient ratios, work overtime, or to cover shortfalls. This is compounded by the increasing workforce need for ED nurses, as emergency departments expand to cope with increasing presentations of all complexities.⁸ This, all in the light of an increasing responsibility to run a financially viable health care system, which, to clinicians at the forefront of emergency care, may seem more a business model than a patient-centric model.⁸ A study from Australia discusses the impact that unions have had to ensure nurse-to-patient ratios, which, in turn, may secure a minimum required staffing level but lacks evidence around how to staff for acuity. They cite the negative impact on patient outcomes related to inadequate staffing levels.¹⁷ One must also reflect on the negative effect on emergency nursing recruitment and retention. Even the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) discusses the importance of the nursing workforce model of the emergency department and notes that it is a complex issue with many variants.¹⁸ Understaffing and/or a mismatch of nurse-to-patient ratios are linked to poorer patient outcomes and decreased satisfaction.¹⁹ The evidence also tells us that patient and staff satisfaction have a causal link. This vicious cycle of patient and staff dissatisfaction and high competing demands in the emergency department are all affecting recruitment and retention of the emergency-nursing workforce.

Second, fatigue is then the next sequence of events for emergency nurses who are dealing with chronic nursing shortages as well as increasing workplace aggression. Wolf et al²⁰ discuss a very interesting concept that appears to evolve from the multilayered issue relating to ED nurse retention, and that is the horizontal violence dealt by colleagues. When compounding factors in the emergency department lead to a very toxic and high-pressured environment, with nurses who are chronically feeling fatigued, it appears to damage the culture of the emergency department.²⁰ Fatigue in emergency nurses is more than merely feeling tired because it has been a busy shift. Fatigue can include physical, emotional, mental and compassion exhaustion.²¹ Errors can occur; this has been reported across many of the studies reviewed.^{20,21}

There are many other demands placed on emergency nurses, with the same common themes sounding out globally around decreased patient interaction, more complex in-

formation technology systems, decreased job satisfaction due to pressures of “running a business,” and salary concerns.³

RESILIENCE

Resilience was a common theme throughout many studies in the literature. What is resilience in emergency nursing? Some authors would suggest that understanding the work environment better, and all the elements that add to the stressors within the work place for emergency nurses, could arm them with the correct tools to build resilience.²² In emergency nursing, having resilience against all the stressors of the work environment is imperative.

There are many factors that have impact on a nurse's level of resilience; one study reflected on how an ED nurse's emotional involvement with patients and their families may affect the level of anger displayed toward them.²³ Other authors believe that patient satisfaction is closely linked with the relationship they have with ED nurses.²⁴ Without a heightened sense of resilience or training to deal with the issues described, emergency nurses in particular would become more susceptible to emotional or moral distress and burnout that may have impact on nursing retention.

Resilience among emergency nurses is not a taught skill; rather, it appears to be an intrinsic trait.²⁰ Wolf et al²⁵ discuss the issue of moral distress and how the evidence shows that environmental factors—not necessarily critical incidents—test an emergency nurse's resilience. Studies throughout this review have highlighted the importance of role modeling, collegiality, and further training to ensure that we address the issues of retention of emergency nurses through building of resilience.^{16,20}

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The evidence is clear around how education and professional development has positive impact on staff satisfaction and, in turn, recruitment and retention.²⁶ In a systematic review in 2017, the authors looked at the impact of preceptorship programs with novice emergency nurses. The findings from this review show that more research is required to fully understand if preceptorship and mentorship programs do have a positive impact on retention, but, clearly, the evidence shows that it improves nursing competence and skill levels.²⁷ The level of training required appears to vary largely across the world with the likes of Australian training requiring postgraduate qualifications, whereas the United States has a voluntary certification process. This must also be evaluated if advanced training provides greater financial rewards for emergency nurses and, in turn, improves rates of staff retention.²⁸

Discussion

Nurse managers of emergency departments are best positioned to address this complex issue regarding retention. Some evidence in the literature reports that nurse managers are contributing to retention issues in emergency departments as staff feels a growing disconnect between the business of emergency departments and nursing in the emergency department.¹⁵ The changing role of the nurse unit manager gives us the best opportunity to build closer relationships with the ED nursing team and assist them with strategies to build a sustainable workforce. The need to build a positive culture of teamwork, collegiality, and to promote professional development would improve staff satisfaction and retention.²⁹ What also needs to be incorporated into any work around recruitment and retention is an understanding of the unique personality of an emergency nurse. There is evidence available in the literature that may guide nurse managers in a more selective interview tool that would highlight what is known about the personality traits of emergency nurses.³⁰ Those personality traits may include extroversion and being open to new experiences with a very warm and positive outlook.³⁰

We must urgently address the lack of support felt at all levels by emergency nurses and look at avenues to promote better teamwork and invest in developing high performing teams. The evidence supports the need for strong leadership in this area to improve recruitment and retention, even referencing defining the importance of this highly specialized unit.³¹

In a recent article, Emergency Nurses Association past-president Kathleen E. Carlson discusses the evidence growing for the feeling of disconnection of nurses to patients and the importance of nursing presence.³² This message highlights the qualitative aspect of nursing care and the importance of a patient-centric health care system. Nurses have strong qualities and attributes that lend to an empathetic nature; they value interacting with patients and offering a holistic approach to care. As discussed previously, emergency nurses have specific personality traits, in addition to these general qualities, that enable them to thrive in high-paced environments.^{20,32} Emergency nursing cannot rely solely on the tasks that need to be performed.³²

Implications for Emergency Nursing

We have many years of evidence that not only provides a picture of the changing landscapes of emergency departments globally but that emergency nursing is evolving into a highly skilled and resilient workforce. Nurse managers of

emergency departments must strive to address this complex issue regarding retention, to build teamwork and staff satisfaction, and promote ongoing professional development.²⁹

It would be easy to jump to “quick fix” solutions, but what is evident in all the research available is that a strategy is needed, a strategy that addresses all the key issues regarding emergency nursing recruitment and retention: education, environment, salary, resilience, leadership, and teamwork.

We need to find a way to engage positively with the next generation of the nursing workforce and develop strategies to increase resilience and longevity in the careers of emergency nurses.

Conclusion

Nurses want to feel valued in the work they do every day in emergency departments; they want support from management and leaders in emergency nursing. Historically, there has been an evolution of emergency departments with increased presentations, an aging society, and increasing burden of disease. Emergency nursing is at a crossroads, and action must take place now; the nurse unit manager is in a prime position to have a positive effect on the future of emergency nursing. Recruitment and retention must be at the forefront of health care organizations, professional bodies, and training providers. Strengthening the workforce today will hold us in good stead for the future.

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