



The Nursing Shortage

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Abstract

The nursing shortage is a major problem that exists globally. Many people are unaware of how widespread this shortage actually is. Hospitals are not able to function efficiently because of the lack of workers to perform necessary procedures and tasks that many patients are in need of. This problem has existed for many years and grows increasingly worse. It is urgent that a solution needs to be implemented to help this crisis. There are many things that contribute to this issue including the hostile working conditions which make it impossible for nurses to be able to perform to their full potential when they are not properly equipped for their job. The workforce being predominantly older has also played a major effect because the retirement rate is higher than the younger workers joining the workforce. Nurses also have an unprofessionally low salary which makes this profession extremely unappealing. By increasing education that is taught throughout nursing school, they can be equipped to tackle all these challenges and bring new people into the profession. More opportunities are also available and with more experience it enhances their quality of skill.

Keywords: Nursing, Shortage, Working Conditions, Aging Workforce, Salary, Education, Skills, Younger Workers, Opportunities

Introduction

Institutional corruption creates a hostile workforce, especially affecting the nursing sector. Dealing with understaffing in the midst of the great depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt gives insight on the corruption of banks and the struggle of hiring workers in desperate times. Roosevelt notes “our greatest task is to put people to work... this is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously” (23). Similarly, Olympic gymnast Simone Biles depicts the corruption of the Olympics showing the effect on athletes stating “the key ingredient to courage is vulnerability... if the action is not vulnerable, it is not courageous” (43). This correlates with the conditions of the medical system causing nurses to be burnt

out. Adel Tamata, nursing professor from Vanuatu College, shares that according to the World Health Organization there is a shortage of 7.2 million healthcare workers to execute basic medical services worldwide, including newborn delivery and chemotherapy (1). In the United States, approximately 3 million nurses are needed to fulfill the gap, which cannot be easily achieved (Tamata 1). Barbara Bergmann, economist at the University of Maryland, shares the chance of a patient dying while they are hospitalized has been estimated to rise by 7% with each additional patient a nurse must attend to (93). Being aware of the problem leads one to question: What are the main factors contributing to the global nursing shortage and how can medical systems and administrators address this issue? After

examining the main causes, increasing nursing education is the most effective way to address the nursing shortage because it equips nurses with advanced skills, attracts younger workers, and opens up opportunities for career advancement.

Working Conditions

Several experts agree that nurse's working conditions are detrimental to their mental health, causing extreme burnout among the workforce. Lu Wang, nurse from Bryan Psychiatry, states "the cause of job burnout may be related to the gap between job expectations and professional reality" (17). Wang explains how nursing is not what people imagined or were prepared for, leading them to be in conditions they mentally can not handle. From a different perspective, Michael Sainato, reporter for The Guardian, states "understaffing worsened during the pandemic... while nurses worked through breaks and past scheduled shifts to try to keep up with the demand" (1). Sainato explains the overflow and pressure from the pandemic is what caused conditions to become substandard. Tengiz Verulava, nursing professor from Ilia State University, is in agreement but emphasizes an implication highlighting, "nurses who work in medical facilities with negative environmental conditions are not satisfied with their jobs" (13). Similarly, Verulava explains nurses are burnt out because of the work overload that one nurse has to handle. With false expectations explained by Wang and Verulava, along with Sainato's description of the pandemic's negative impact, all experts share the common idea that inadequate working conditions in hospitals led to the nursing shortage.

Aging Workforce

Multiple experts have looked into how aging significantly lowered the rates of new nurses entering the workforce. Debra Siela, nursing professor at Ball State University, states "as faculty age continues to climb, there is a narrowing of productive years left during which many nurse educators can teach" (18). With an aging workforce, staff positions become more scarce and there is limited time educators have to fulfill the roles. Adding to this, Lula Pelayo, director of nursing at Alamo College, states "the loss of experienced faculty members would cripple the educational system" (21). Pelayo contributes to the ideas of Siela, that the number of nurses will only decrease as less teachers are available to educate nursing students. Another major

concern introduced by Dylan Scott, author of VoxCare newsletter, is "the aging workforce is part of the problem, and not enough students are enrolling in nursing school to offset those losses" (1). The aging workforce combined with low enrollment is troublesome for future years in nursing. Differentiating, Barabra McIntosh, internal medicine specialist from the University of Vermont, is worried about the retirement age stating "55 could well become the average age of working nurses in the next decade" (56). McIntosh states if nurses delay their retirement, the majority of them will be at an older age, causing a stressful environment due to the lack of new nurses entering the profession. With the loss of faculty members explained by Siela and Pelayo, combined with Scott's exploration of the retirement age, and McIntosh's description of the prevailing challenge of enrollment rates, the aging workforce one way or another will have a negative impact on the future of nursing.

Unfair Salary

Experts agree that nursing salaries are especially low for the heavy workload they take on and tough conditions they have to work in. Verulava states that "because of low salaries and hard work, the nursing profession is not attractive and prestigious" (15). Verulava is worried about the reputation of nursing professions because low wages make nursing less attractive to young people. Another serious concern from Scott is that travel nursing firms offer higher salaries "which can lure nurses away from permanent employment" (1). Scott adds on to the previous claims by describing the benefits of being a travel nurse. Leana Wen, columnist from the Washington Post, agrees stating traveling nurse positions "have long provided stopgap coverage for rural areas that struggle to recruit nurses" (1). Like Scott, Wen points out the reason rural areas struggle to hire nurses in hospitals is because more are gravitating towards traveling nurse positions. While Scott and Wen focus on the benefits of being a travel nurse, and Verulava acknowledges the negative look of the nursing workforce, they all describe how low wages affect the shortage and should be raised in order to have a more beneficial, productive, and successful hospital nursing environment.

Solution: Increase Nurse Education

Increasing nursing education can attract more people to the profession. It will equip nurses with advanced skills and mental health strategies to handle complex situations and conditions. More specifically, nursing students

can pick a medical specialty they are interested in and have the opportunity to focus in that specific field. In order for this to happen, educational institutions such as colleges, universities, and vocational schools need to redesign the way they deliver nursing education programs. They need to develop a curriculum, provide faculty, offer resources, and facilitate clinical experiences through partnerships and foundations with healthcare organizations. Increasing nursing education is the most effective way to address the nursing shortage because it will help equip nurses with advanced knowledge in a specific field, attract younger nurses to join the workforce, and open up opportunities for career advancement.

Advanced Skills

Higher education equips nurses with advanced skills to make them more equipped for their roles leading to reduced stress. Jennifer Flaubert, Program Officer at National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, states “some nursing schools offer programs that are designed to prepare students academically and socially for the rigors of nursing education” (1). These types of programs will benefit future nurses tremendously by preparing them with the knowledge and skills that will make them coherent to the future of their career. Some licensed practical nurses can even further their education to become registered nurses to create greater flexibility in staffing (Flaubert 4). Adopting an education system within hospitals that will educate nurses on updated skills and continuing competencies can help advance nurses' work ethic throughout their career (Flaubert 4). Danica Sumpter, clinical associate professor from the University of Texas, states forming partnerships between nursing programs could become a viable option for the distance-based delivery of content that requires considerable faculty expertise” (50). Nursing students can get hands-on education from experienced nurses, addressing the gap between learning and real-world practice Franklin D. Roosevelt encourages this approach stating “the joy and moral stimulation of work no longer must be forgotten in the mad chase of evanescent profits” (22). In the midst of a profit centered workforce, furthering their education to specific career paths will help nurses stay motivated and connected to their work by giving them the opportunity to excel in a nursing career they are passionate about.

Attracts Younger Workers

An increase in nursing education can attract younger workers by offering enhanced professional development opportunities and leadership roles. Linda Aiken, from the University of Pennsylvania, states in 2008 more than 40,000 qualified applicants were turned away from baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs because of limitations in educational capacity (1). By expanding nursing education programs, young aspiring nurses will be able to fulfill their goals without facing the impending layoff by certain limitations in the nursing schools (Aiken 1). Bvumbwe Thokozani, professor of nursing at Mzuzu University Malawi, shares how “nursing can be improved when a collaborative implementation of education exists between the academic and clinical practice” (8). Younger nursing students favor the idea of having hands-on experience as a preview to an actual clinical setting, which increases the chance that more will follow through until the end of schooling. Sumpter shares that future academic nursing programs must ensure that nursing students are aware of their own well-being and are equipped to access care when faced with mental health challenges (7). If part of the curriculum in nursing schools is dedicated to mental health, younger nurses will be prepared for struggles they may face and learn how to manage them. McIntosh states that all workers appear to be looking for some form of security and the ability to balance their work and personal lives, either through job flexibility or paid time off (56). The outdated education system amplifies issues such as time management that need to be addressed to bring new workers in the profession.

Opportunities for Career Advancement

Increasing nursing education can serve as a mechanism for addressing low salaries by permitting nurses with advanced qualifications and opportunities. Flaubert states that when nurses have the will to return to higher education it opens opportunities for younger nurses to benefit from them (4). Along with this, Pelayo states that nurses with bachelor degrees serving as clinical teaching assistants can bring current field knowledge into the classroom (351). This will help bridge the gap for nurses between learning and real-world practice. Aiken states The American Recovery and Reinvestment which was made to create new job openings and restore old ones, included \$500 million for health professions training, \$300 million of which is through the National Health Service Corps (1). With adequate funding schools are able to expand

and create a wider variety of options for aspiring nurses to take. It is beneficial that “school graduations be increased by 30 percent and that public support to facilitate increased output of nursing schools be targeted to encourage more nurses to seek BSN degrees” (Aiken 1). Flaubert shows how the number of nurses holding a doctorate must be increased to produce a greater pool of nurses prepared to assume faculty and research positions (4). If the nursing sector is specifically supported by the number of graduates, it will encourage them to pursue a higher education.

Limitations and Implications

Despite all the reasons this is the best solution, there are still certain limitations that can deter the outcome. Changing the way education is taught in schools around the world requires a significant amount of time and cost from institutions to hire faculty, develop new curriculum, and provide more training facilities. Creating a hands-on learning experience involves being in a clinical setting that may not have the space to give students an equal chance to learn. Aspiring nurses also need the desire to challenge themselves and advocate for this change. Moral Courage and Intelligent Disobedience by Ted Thomas and Ira Chaleff explains how the “failure to find and act on that courage often does more damage to a career

and life” (59). It is evident that making a change is not easy to put into practice because there could be resistance from policy makers or stakeholders that invest in their education. Shifting to the positives, Galiano Martínez, nursing professor at the University of Jaén, states, studying content that is focused on nursing better meets the expectations of students who chose to study nursing” (6). As with funding, a recent proposal was submitted to create an innovative paradigm for nurses and a three-year reward, totaling \$4.5 million, was received (Pelayo 351). It is possible to gain the acquisition of financial support to gather funds allocated for reshaping nursing education. Nurses will be encouraged to use clinical judgment in decision-making, the development of the necessary professional skills, and the consolidation of the theoretical knowledge studied (Martínez 2). This will make the future as a nurse safer for nurses and patients.

Call to Action

With the help of educational institutions, it is within reach to gather the funds and deliver a new curriculum for nursing students around the world. Increasing nursing education is the most effective way to address the nursing shortage because it equips nurses with advanced skills, attracts younger workers, and opens up opportunities for career advancement.

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