

**Healthcare at Risk: Nursing Shortage and Poor Patient Care**

Sangcavi Jeyamohan

York University

AP/HRM 3400 Section C: Occupational Health and Safety

Dr. Duygu Biricik Gulseren

November 22, 2022

*Keywords: nurse shortage, burnout, patient care*

## **Healthcare at Risk: Nursing Shortage and Poor Patient Care**

### **Description of the Organization and Unit:**

Hospitals around the world, especially in Ontario are experiencing a tremendous nursing shortage. Nurses are frontline workers and are pivotal healthcare professionals in patient care. They are responsible for assessing and monitoring patient symptoms, providing therapeutic management, working in collaboration with healthcare professionals to build a plan of care and advocating for keeping patient's needs as the priority. The nursing profession works around the clock for 365 days ensuring patients receive optimal and quality patient care while promoting quality of life in all their patients.

The staff in each unit in the hospital will vary depending on the type of unit, the number of beds, and the diagnosis of the patient, and the associated healthcare professionals in the plan of care. In this unit, there are approximately eighty-five nurses, a clinical manager, a clinical educator, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and social workers. Hospital nurses work in rotation as per their contract. Full-time nurses will work four days in a row, following five days off. Nurses will work twelve hour shifts and occasionally work eight-hour shifts. The nurses will assist patients with activities of daily living (ADLs), head-to-toe assessments, administer medications, follow physician orders, perform vital signs, and reposition patients. In addition, they will monitor the patient's overall health status while developing a therapeutic relationship with the patient and their family. A clinical educator is the backbone for nurses. They provide education to nurses, initiate quality improvement, and ensure nurses have the knowledge, skill, and judgment to provide safe and effective patient care.

### **Description of the Problem:**

Nurses are experiencing a significant increase in work-related injuries and burnout that is contributing to the nursing shortage, the high patient-nurse ratios, and the poor patient outcomes. The stress of the pandemic in healthcare and nurses working in the trenches fighting COVID-19, nurses are burnout and are experiencing moral distress; emotionally, physically, and mentally. The moral distress from having an increased number of high acuity patients that are either two-assists or total assists and require complex post-surgical care. On average the nurse-patient ratio is 1:3, but with the nursing shortage in the unit, nurses are 1:6 or worse, 1:9. The accumulation of patients is causing a significant impact on nurses' health. Many nurses on the unit are calling in sick or experiencing work-related injuries such as tearing a muscle, straining their back, or

plantar fasciitis. With nurses overexerting themselves, they are causing harm to their own bodies and it impacts their career as they are on modified duty. With nurses on a leave of absence from sustaining injuries and quitting the profession because of being burnt out, there leaves less nurses. With the heavy workload and the stress on nurses, they are making unintentional mistakes due to not thinking effectively and clearly, putting patients at risk.

Burnout not only affects nurses, but the patients as well. Patients are not receiving the care they once did. For instance, the therapeutic relationships built and helping patients with their morning routine such as brushing their hair or giving a bed bath is no longer a priority in nursing care. With the increase in workload, nurses do not have time to provide basic care for patients. A nurse working a twelve-hour day shift with six acute patients only has time to administer medications, take vital signs and blood sugar as ordered, conduct their assessments, and provide care for any tubing or wounds. Nurses are cramped for time; they cannot have a therapeutic conversation with their patients or assist them with their ADLs. This results in patients feeling neglected, abandoned, and alone as it is unfair for patients to be treated this way at a vulnerable time for them.

The manager of the unit is experiencing significant staff retention as they are losing their new hires because of seeing the work environment with “high nurse-patient ratios, the go, go, go of nurses, limited nurses, and the high acuity and heavy patients”. They are experiencing an ongoing cycle without any breakthrough to resolving the nurse shortage and burnout in the unit. Additionally, seeing the gaps in learning and not being able to attend to the needs of the staff is distressing for the clinical educator as they are not able to fulfill their role as there is not enough time to provide education for nurses to improve upon their skills, knowledge, and judgment. With the ripple effect of losing new hires and nurses getting injured and quitting their jobs, the manager and educator are in a highly intense situation where the nursing shortage is causing them to perform poorly because of burnout. Consequently, patients’ health is at risk because they are not receiving competent care from overworked nurses as they should be.

**Discussion questions:**

1. How can nurses advocate for their patients to ensure they receive adequate care? Would asking family members to help with ADLs and basic care alleviate the workload for nurses?

2. As a role of a clinical educator, how can you improve the gaps in knowledge of nurses with the limited time nurses have?
3. What are some self-care regimens and tools nurses can implement to reduce burnout?
4. As a manager of a unit with a nursing shortage, what are some ways from a management perspective to prevent new hires from leaving? What can a clinical educator and nurses do?
5. What are some ways to create a supportive environment in the unit? How can nurses support each other to reduce burnout and the workload?

## Appendix

### Interview Questions

- 1) Can we start with getting to know you? What kind of an organization you work for?  
What is your role? How long have you been in this organization/role?
- 2) Can you please provide more details about your organization? (e.g., industry, size, daily activities etc.)
- 3) Can you tell us about a significant health and safety-related challenge you have been facing in this organization?
  - a. Why is this a significant problem?
  - b. What is the management's position in this challenge?
  - c. What are the employee's position in this challenge?
  - d. Why do you think this problem has a difficult solution?
- 4) Can you please tell us about a specific incident when this problem presented?
  - a. What was the situation?
  - b. What was your task?
  - c. What action was taken?
  - d. What were the results?
- 5) Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Thank you for your time.