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Running on Empty

Retaining nurses on the leading edge of population health initiatives

■ **By Susan L. Montminy, EdD, MPA, BSN, RN, CPHRM, CPPS**

In nearly three decades of experience as a nurse, including time spent as an oncology nurse, I have felt the pain of loss and shared tears with families. But never in my career did I experience the unrelenting, high frequency of loss today's nurses have experienced in the past several years—nor have I witnessed anything like the shortage of nursing talent and subsequent strain placed on nursing staff present across healthcare today. Unless significant improvements are made, this situation will only grow worse as the nation's population ages.

The challenges confronting the nursing workforce are not all new, but the pandemic dramatically accelerated and exacerbated the issues involved and even resulted in burnout for many in healthcare, including physicians, administrators, and patients. The impact on nurses, however, is particularly severe.

Nursing Is in a State of Crisis

While there are encouraging signs that some nurses who left the profession during the pandemic are returning, many are taking on nontraditional patient care roles. The National Council of State Boards of Nursing found that approximately 100,000 nurses left the workforce

during the pandemic due to “stress, burnout, and retirements,” and another 610,388 intend to leave over the next three years.¹ The 2023 Survey of Registered Nurses conducted by AMN Healthcare found that 80% of nurses believe the staffing shortage will get worse in the next five years.²

Such findings reflect a profession in crisis.

Perhaps most alarmingly, ongoing shortages will continue to place increased stress and additional work on the nurses who remain. The ratio of patients to caregivers is already increasing, meaning nurses will have less time to spend with each patient. This reality cuts to the very core of what motivates nurses and makes nursing the most trusted profession.

Our Most Trusted Professionals

When it comes to trust, nurses rank higher than those in any other profession. In Gallup's most recent annual survey, 79% of American adults said they believe nurses have “‘very high’ or ‘high’ honesty and ethical standards.”³ Nurses rank far higher than the profession that comes in as the second-most trusted: medical doctors at 62%. Notably, nurses have earned the top spot every year since nursing was included in the survey with the sole exception of 2001, when firefighters held the top spot after the September 11 attacks.

Such findings should come as no surprise. Nurses care and feel deeply. They understand the importance of communication and patient-centeredness. For so many, nursing is far more than a job; it is a mission—an ethic and an ethos.

The Impact on Population Health Initiatives

A main goal of population health management is to keep patients as healthy as possible and minimize the need for acute care interventions. To effectively realize this goal, nurses need to have time to make personal connections with individual patients. In a recent survey conducted by the Michigan Health and Hospital Association, 7 in 10 nurses reported that they are “assigned an unsafe patient load in half or more of their shifts,” and more than 90% said they lack “time to properly comfort and assist patients and families.”⁴

If nurses are stressed, overwhelmed, or burned out by a patient load they believe to be unsafe, quality of care decreases, and the ability to provide individual attention is minimized. Not being able to meet their own personal standard of care for patients is more than a workplace inconvenience for dedicated nurses—it impacts the very health of the nursing staff.

Applying Population Health Principles to Nursing Teams

Leaders who oversee the implementation of population health initiatives recognize that no other

group within the clinical environment spends more time with patients or has a greater impact on patient outcomes than nurses. It is imperative for healthcare organizations to apply population health strategies to their nurses, a key population within their own organizations. Consider for a moment how population health principles can be applied to impact the health, happiness, and effectiveness of the existing nursing staff.

► Social Determinants of Health:

What pressures outside of the clinical environment affect the performance of the organization’s nursing professionals?

Three Long-Term Strategies

In the ongoing struggle to address nurse staffing challenges, healthcare leaders can begin to create positive change by exploring and embracing three key strategies:

1 Retain existing nurses: In the face of current staffing trends, recruiting nurses alone is not a sufficient strategy for success.

The members of the existing nursing staff must be empowered to speak up to effect change and be motivated to grow professionally. To improve retention efforts, gather data to monitor stress levels, concerns, and associated causes, and then develop action plans to address them. Offer professional development opportunities and support for certification in areas of interest.

Conduct exit interviews. Aggregate and analyze the data to identify root causes and determine appropriate intervention to prevent further loss of nursing staff. Create multiple forums to ensure the nursing staff is heard. Preferably, find out about issues before staff decide to leave.

2 Create a team environment: Like all professionals, nurses want to feel like they are part of a strong team. They want to feel included. They want to feel supported. It is imperative to foster opportunities for nursing teams to form relationships with each other and with leadership. A team environment in which communication is enhanced and natural makes staff comfortable to speak up when a concern is identified. Individuals who feel part of a team will also notice when a team member is struggling, so they can benefit from emotional support if needed. Medical errors are prone to occur when someone is fatigued, stressed, or distracted by physical, personal, or work matters.

In Coverys’ white paper titled “A Nurse’s Role in Patient Safety,” failure to function as a cohesive clinical team was a contributing factor in a large number of incidents.⁵ Creating a culture that champions teamwork requires purposeful strategy and strong leadership. Ask yourself: When was the last time you made rounds with the nurses in your organization? What are you doing to give the nurse who just lost a patient the time to grieve? What non-nursing tasks are nurses doing that could be performed by others? Have you leveraged technology to help alleviate nursing tasks?

Are staff members struggling to pay off student loans or stressed because of financial worries? Is childcare an issue? Are they caring for aging parents or an ill family member? In many cases, investments that help nurses outside of work can have a profound impact on their performance inside of work.

► **Data:** All healthcare organizations should know how their nurses are doing, what they are struggling with, and where problems lie. As with patient care, this operational intelligence can only be achieved with data. Leaders should have established and proactive

processes in place that enable them to gauge the mental and emotional well-being of their nursing staff, as well as informal but regular opportunities to ask them how they are doing—a gesture that shows nurses they are valued. The importance of rounding, surveys, and focus groups cannot be stressed enough.

► **Standards of Care:** When treating patients with chronic disease and comorbidities, clinicians rely on an established standard of care to provide effective treatment. It is important for the organization to possess standard protocols of care to ensure a consistent approach

and avoid potential negative patient outcomes. Coverys recently analyzed 850 closed claims in which nurses were involved in patient care. The data revealed that patient monitoring (45%), patient falls (18%), medication-related issues (14%), and pressure ulcers (10%) were the most common areas of vulnerability. These data are offered as a signal for organizations to proactively examine these areas and focus efforts on implementing strategies to minimize risk and safeguard the well-being of nurses who may experience grief if a patient is harmed under their care.⁵

3 Create a patient safety culture: To err is human, but for a healthcare organization to be successful, it must proactively manage and mitigate risk. Patient outcomes are heavily influenced by the organization's collective ability to deliver high-quality care. This requires a culture of patient safety.

Creating a patient safety culture with resultant high-quality care demands an environment in which nurses feel comfortable openly drawing attention to mistakes or close calls—for example, almost giving a patient the wrong medication—and, just as importantly, determining how the same scenario can be prevented in the future. A learning organization with a strong patient safety culture is attainable when there is a shared acceptance that errors occur, with an even stronger focus on collaborative efforts to find a solution. Creating this culture requires nurses to be proactively included not just in patient safety conversations, but also in the development of solutions.

Administrators and physicians play a significant role in these strategies. Leadership sets the tone from the top and creates an environment that encourages kindness and empathy at its core. In order to stay focused on the larger mission and the goal of delivering exceptional care in the journey toward population health—an endeavor that will always find no greater supporter than today's dedicated nursing professionals—it is time to treat employee-centeredness with the same importance as patient-centeredness. Nurses, too, are a population that would benefit from strategies to maintain their health. **CPJ**

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Resources and Recommended Reading

1. The National Council of State Boards of Nursing. 2023. Examining the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Burnout and Stress Among U.S. Nurses. Available at ncsbn.org/news/ncsbn-research-projects-significant-nursing-workforce-shortages-and-crisis.
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3. Gallup. 2023. Poll: American's Ratings of Honesty and Ethics of Professionals. Available at news.gallup.com/poll/467804/nurses-retain-top-ethics-rating-below-2020-high.aspx.
4. Michigan Health and Hospital Association. 2023. Survey of Registered Nurses Living or Working in Michigan. Available at npr.brightspotcdn.com/44/84/d8585b204f6598064d911f5e0661/emma-white-research-memo.pdf.
5. M.J. Hakim, R. Hanscom, M. Icenhower, et al. 2022. A Dose of Insight – A Nurse's Crucial Role in Patient Safety. Coverys. Available at coverys.com/knowledge-center/a-dose-of-insight-nurses-patient-safety.