



Shortage Strategies *Retaining the Experienced Nurse*

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Nurse leaders know all too well that the nursing shortage will continue to worsen. According to the latest estimates by the Health Resources and Services Administration, the United States will have at least 340,000 fewer nurses practicing in 2020 than today.¹ Furthermore, the American Nurses Association projects that, more than 82% of US nurses 40 years and older will retire over the next 20 years.¹

A lack of research exists on how to retain the skills and expertise of experienced bedside nurses. Organizations such as AARP are looking at the aging workforce across industries, whereas healthcare leaders are focusing on nurse recruitment and retention, regardless of age. Surprisingly, little research is being conducted to connect the two—how to retain the older nurse. To address this gap, we need to develop quickly an evidence base aimed specifically at retaining the experienced nurse.

The Financial and Institutional Costs

Nurses 40 years and older comprise more than one-third of the

healthcare workforce. In just 3 years, 40% of all registered nurses will be older than 50 years, setting the stage for a wave of retirements.² Beyond the financial impact of nurses leaving the workforce, the costs of losing the knowledge and skills they take with them when they leave are difficult to quantify, yet impossible to ignore. Experienced nurses bring skills to the bedside that are not easily learned from a textbook and often not taught in a classroom. Experienced nurses know how to provide compassionate care, prevent safety risks, and anticipate patients' and family members' needs, all to ensure that each patient received the highest quality of care. New nurses and midcareer nurses can benefit from the wisdom that comes from years of experience caring for patients. This knowledge must be passed on; if nurses—and their experience—walk out the door, the nursing profession, the healthcare system, and patients and families will suffer.

Common Concerns and Promising Interventions

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) has made significant investments to improve the hospital work environment.

In doing so, we have learned that healthcare leaders need research on successful strategies for creating an ideal work environment to retain experienced nurses.

The Foundation commissioned the report *Wisdom at Work: The Importance of the Older and Experienced Nurse in the Workplace*,³ the first-ever examination of retention strategies aimed at experienced nurses. The study authors performed a comprehensive literature review, surveyed 377 older nurses about what might keep them in nursing longer, and conducted expert interviews with representatives from leading healthcare organizations. These experts shared common concerns and highlighted programs and strategies to retain experienced nurses.

The research identified many reasons why nurses leave the hospital. Common concerns include heavy patient loads and inappropriate nurse staffing levels. Two additional factors include physical demands and emotionally challenging work, which can result in injuries and burnout. Nurses described how 12-hour shifts leave little room for flexibility, often conflicting with personal responsibilities and interests. This is especially true for older nurses with caregiving

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demands at home. Finally, nurses reported feeling unappreciated and undervalued by physicians and hospital leaders and yearn for a more supportive setting where their leadership role is recognized and valued.

The *Wisdom at Work* report described a number of promising interventions that hospitals might consider as part of their recruitment and retention strategies (Figure 1).

Building an Evidence Base: Exploring Promising Interventions

The promising interventions identified in the *Wisdom at Work* report are a first step toward developing successful retention strategies aimed at experienced nurses, but there is still a need

- Boosting 401(k) participation and redefining pensions.
- Providing caregiving and grief resources.
- Establishing corporate cultures that value the mature worker.
- Offering flexible work options.
- Pursuing Magnet status.
- Instituting mentoring programs.
- Offering phased retirement, paired with knowledge transfer initiatives.
- Providing retirement planning education.
- Assessing and understanding workforce strengths and needs.
- Offering training, lifelong learning, and professional development.
- Improving ergonomics and workplace design.

Figure 1. Recruitment and Retention Strategies.

for more research. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recently launched a new program, *Wisdom at Work: Retaining Experienced Nurses*, to begin building an evidence base about what works to retain experienced nurses in hospital settings. The Foundation is working with the Lewin Group to develop a better understanding of the impact of existing interventions to retain experienced nurses in 13 hospitals. The results from these grants will provide healthcare leaders with transferable lessons and strategies that they can adopt in their own facilities.

The *Wisdom at Work* program will examine hospitals that use technology, human resources strategies, or physical design changes to improve the work environment and retain experienced nurses. For example, efforts are underway to reduce the physical demands placed on nurses and prevent injuries related to lifting and moving patients. Other projects are building the evidence around different staffing models: Poudre Valley Health System in Fort Collins, Colo, has implemented a “base staffing model” to staff for frequent peak occupancy rather than average occupancy, whereas Centra Health, Inc, in Lynchburg, Va, will be analyzing data on their closed staffing model. The *Wisdom at Work* program will capture the important lessons from the 13 grantees and make them available to hospitals across the nation.

Moving Forward: Excitement in the Field

Since releasing the *Wisdom at Work* report, we at RWJF have and heard a real desire for retention strategies targeting experienced nurses. Healthcare leaders want tangible and effective solutions immediately, before more experienced nurses leave the hospital and take their invaluable experience with them. Experienced nurses are eager to have their knowledge and expertise recognized and valued by hospital leadership. Now is the time to harness this enthusiasm and create a more ideal work environment for experienced nurses. Otherwise, we face a mass departure of these important resources, and all of us will be affected.

To learn more about *Wisdom and Work* and retaining experienced nurses, visit www.retainexperiencednurses.org.

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