

The Depths of Despair: Nurses Reflect on the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Structured Abstract

PROBLEM/BACKGROUND

The climate in the healthcare environment pre-COVID-19 pandemic was plagued with high stress, staff shortages, and sick patients (Havaei et al., 2021). The extra work to train new staff strains an already stretched nursing workforce to care for increased patient loads with less staffing while working mandatory additional shifts to cover patient care units. As a result, healthcare leaders are challenged to develop and implement programs necessary to retain current and recruit nursing staff.

PROJECT PURPOSE

This project aimed to review nurses' responses to the COVID-19 Nurses Needs Assessment online survey conducted by the Alabama State Nurses Association and make recommendations based on descriptions of their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Nola Pender's Health Promotion Model (HPM) is the framework guiding this DNP project. The HPM addresses internal and external factors, including individual experiences with a particular concept, behaviors distinct to a concept, and possible outcomes. During this project, the HPM model was used to evaluate how those factors positively or negatively influenced the ability of nurses to cope with the increased stress exposure during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This DNP project was a content analysis completed in the Spring of 2023 using the qualitative data from the Alabama State Nurses Association's online survey offered to registered nurses in Alabama. The survey was a mixed methods survey consisting of 16 questions with eight quantitative and eight qualitative questions. Seven of the eight qualitative questions in the survey were included by reviewers in the content analysis. This project included several steps in determining the most common sources of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic from the 400-plus pages of qualitative data provided by the ASNA and was as follows: Step 1: Evaluate survey responses to extract themes from qualitative data. Step 2: Identify causes within each theme. Step 3: Research evidence-based practice changes. Step 4: Provide recommendations for change to Alabama State Nurses Association.

EVALUATION

The evaluation of this content analysis project was a review of the themes identified from data collected by the ASNA from July 2020 to February 2021. The content analysis results were presented to ASNA leadership along with requested feedback questions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After reviewing this survey, we feel it is evident that the current generation of nurses is at a significantly increased risk of mental health struggles, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. As leaders and fellow nurses, we are responsible for advocating for mental health

surveillance and assistance, healthy work environments, and adequate compensation. These issues must be addressed, or the healthcare industry will suffer a more significant shortage than previously predicted. We recommend incorporating a proactive approach to screening the mental health of nurses by partnering with the employee assistance program or administration to include a non-punitive screening as part of employee evaluations. The reviewers also advocate for investigating and implementing safe patient ratios for Alabama based on recommendations from the American Nurses Association and National Nurses United. Additionally, to invest in healthy work environment standards identified by the American Association of Critical Care Nurses, including offering competitive pay and compensation in line with the average national salary of nurses in the United States; cultivate interpersonal collaboration through formal training such as TeamSTEPPS, and boost morale by promoting meaningful recognition to all staff members. Finally, offer unit-based stress-relieving activities and quarterly workshops for healthcare workers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The nursing profession is the largest component of patient care in healthcare organizations. The COVID-19 pandemic brought a new layer of stress, adding to the known stressors that nurses face daily. From increased staffing difficulties, lack of personal protective equipment, and concern regarding taking the virus home to families, the stress in the nursing workforce increased exponentially in a short amount of time. This added stress has led to an increase in nurses' anxiety and depression, burnout, staffing shortages, and impacts on patient care. Therefore, healthcare leadership and nursing organizations must work together to create healthy work environments, which have been shown to decrease moral distress and increase nurse retention, positively affecting patient care outcomes.

FEEDBACK

Feedback from the questions provided to ASNA leadership demonstrates that important themes were identified facing the nursing profession during the COVID-19 pandemic. This feedback also indicates that our practice change recommendations could help although hospital leadership would need to buy in which can be difficult.

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