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RETIREMENT INTENTIONS OF OLDER NURSES IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

KEY FINDINGS

- The nursing workforce in Australia is ageing. Because a larger cohort will be retiring, the pool from which the future NT workforce will be drawn is shrinking.
- The remoteness of the NT brings additional challenges to recruitment and retention of new nurses, and particularly to transferring knowledge and skills appropriate to remote environments.
- Most of the NT nurses now nearing retirement age arrived in the 1980s and have many years experience in remote area nursing. Their departure from the profession has impacts on the skills and capabilities of the workforce as a whole.
- In this context it is unclear how this cohort of nurses with many years experience in the NT might contribute to the nursing profession after retirement.
- Strategies developed elsewhere to keep nurses in the workforce include career development, supportive work environment or flexible working arrangements beyond mid-life.
- This research will work with nurse managers and nurses who are approaching retirement age to find out what strategies for post-retirement contribution would be feasible. A report on strategies suited to the specific NT context will be produced at the end of 2009.

RESEARCH AIM

To examine the retirement intentions of older nurses in the Northern Territory and develop strategies for post-retirement contribution to the profession.

The research is being conducted with support from the Northern Territory Department of Health and Families and Northern Territory Treasury.

The research brief was prepared by Katharina Voit.

Statement of purpose

The Northern Territory experiences ongoing nursing workforce shortages. Recent collaboration between researchers at Charles Darwin University and the NT Department of Health and Families helped identify barriers to recruitment and retention and to inform new strategies for addressing recruitment and retention issues. The research found a substantial cohort of nurses with many years experience in the Northern Territory are now reaching retirement age. Their departure from the workforce will both exacerbate shortages and impact on the skills and capabilities of the workforce as a whole. There is a substantial body of research about how to continue to engage retired professionals in the sectors from which they retire, but it is unclear how lessons learnt elsewhere might be applied to the Northern Territory context.

Background

Many countries face gaps between demand and supply of nurses with further increases in demand to be expected. Economic expansion, population growth and ageing as well as technical advances contribute to an increasing demand for nurses. Employers in rural and remote areas have found particular difficulties in finding sufficient numbers of qualified staff. Even though there have been strategies developed for tackling nursing, less attention is paid to remote area nursing and its special features.

The search for effective ways to recruit and retain nurses has taken hold, but the idea that older nurses might be the key to stabilizing the shrinking nursing workforce is a recent one. Existing strategies to tackle shortages mainly focus on delaying retirement and setting incentives for keeping nurses in the workforce. Policy approaches offer more flexible working patterns that aim to reduce the workload and therefore defer the retirement of nurses. Other strategies include mandatory overtime, improvement of the work environment or lighter patient loads.

In the Northern Territory, there is a substantial cohort of 'baby boomer' nurses who have many years experience in NT nursing, and are now approaching retirement. What really is lost with these people leaving the workforce is significant knowledge of how to get a job done faster and better. Losing this knowledge can affect both organizational performance and productivity. As there are not only high costs of staff turnover, but also high costs of losing intellectual capital in the coming years, additional ways of keeping NT nurses engaged in the workforce and saving significant knowledge have to be developed.

This research focuses on retirement intentions of older nurses in the Northern Territory and aims to develop strategies for post-retirement contribution to the nursing profession to save knowledge and tackle nursing shortages. Both nurses as well as nurse managers and policy makers are included in the

research as retaining organizational knowledge is not only a short-term problem but a long term philosophical management approach.

Key literature

This research includes a comparison of the situation and strategies in the Northern Territory with those in other remote jurisdictions (for example, in northern Canada, Alaska, Northern Europe). It also compares the situation in the nursing workforce with that in other professions.

A study conducted in Canada found that Canadian Government policies focused on retention of clinical expertise, the recruitment of new graduates and expanding the role of RPN's have been more difficult to implement in rural settings. In addition, younger and older nurses have vastly different goals. Younger nurses are more likely to choose practice opportunities in urban centres because these offer full-time employment, larger hospitals and communities offering a more comprehensive experience. Older nurses stated that short community distances and community connections are driving factors for them to stay at one place. The study also found that older nurses are aware of the uncertainty of the sustainability of their own workforce and that measures have to be taken to save their clinical expertise. (cf. Montour et al., 2009, p. 5ff.)

A study conducted in the UK identified tailored education, career development, flexible working hours beyond mid-life and creative ways of using older nurses' skills as strategies to reduce the number of nurses that leave the workforce. (cf. Bennet; Maben, 2007, p. 62f.)

Another study from the UK identified reasons to stay or leave the nursing workforce. Important factors for older nurses to maintain in the profession were pension considerations, enhanced pay and reduced workload. Other factors for deciding to stay were being valued by colleagues and managers for their experience and being consulted when change is implemented. Barriers to continuing engagement were high workload, low morale in the workplace and poor work-life balance. Other nurses see a supportive work environment, understanding managers and financial payment reflecting their skills as key factors to retention. (cf. Storey et al., 2009, p. 1408ff.)

A study dealing with staff shortages in UK's National Health Service found that a challenge will be to respond to different learning needs of nurses in their 40s and 50s who may have another potential 10 or 20 years of service to contribute. Flexible working options, addressing their special needs and acknowledging their valuable contribution were important factors to keep them in the workforce. Too much pressure, lack of recognition, long working hours, continual change and lack of support were reasons for older nurses to leave the profession. The continued engagement of experienced, committed and resilient workers was identified as essential to the delivery of quality care. (cf. Wray et al., 2008, p. 978ff.)

As for studies in more remote areas, one survey conducted in Canada found that many workers might be willing to continue working if switching to part-time was possible. Financial considerations were the motivation for some to stay in the workforce while intrinsic aspects such as challenging tasks, social contacts or sense of purpose were most important for others. Another finding was that retirees now will be in better health condition than their predecessors which indicates the potential that lies in the older workforce. (cf. Schellenberg; Turcotte; Ram, 2005, p. 16ff.)

A study conducted in the US dealing with phased retirement options stated that many people say they either will want to or have to work past traditional retirement age. Working arrangements such as part time, part year or cycling in and out of the workforce were identified as different options of staying in their profession. (cf. Sheaks, 2007, p. 57)

What this research should add, is how to adopt ideas to the Northern Territory setting and develop strategies for post-retirement contribution to the nursing profession that both help keeping significant knowledge in the workforce and alleviate nursing shortages.

Strategies used elsewhere to keep older nurses in the workforce are:

- career development
- supportive work environment
- flexible working arrangements beyond mid-life
- creative ways of using older nurses' skills
- payment reflecting skills
- reduced workload
- being valued by colleagues and managers
- being consulted when change is implemented
- challenging tasks
- social contacts

Methods and observations

To get nurses and nurse managers ideas on post-retirement contribution to the profession, unstructured in-depth interviews covering the following areas will be conducted across the NT in September and October 2009.

- Nurses' plans for retirement
- potential post-retirement contributions to the profession (such as mentoring, locum or seasonal work, teaching, consulting...)
- determining factors to do so (current health status and work ability, current job satisfaction, economic factors such as payment or benefits, appreciation of skills and experience, workload and physical work environment...)
- expectations, needs and wishes when continuing engagement

- policy makers and managers awareness of both critical nursing shortages and the aging workforce (main problems regarding the nursing shortages, knowledge management, ways of saving intellectual capital...)
- resulting possibilities of post-retirement contributions (in which areas and functions do managers and policy makers need experienced nurses).

To develop strategies that fit the Northern Territory's needs as a remote area results from questioning nurses, nurse managers and policy makers will be analysed. A report will be produced by the end of 2009.

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