



Understanding intention to leave amongst new graduate Canadian nurses: A repeated cross sectional survey

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ABSTRACT

Background: Previous studies indicate that new graduate nurses' first year of work is both stressful and difficult. The turnover rate of this group is particularly high. There is a need to increase our understanding of why new graduate nurses intend to leave their current employer.

Objectives: The purpose of this study is to examine what proportion of new graduate nurses intends to leave their current position and to examine the relationship between transition programs, empowerment, work environment and intent to leave.

Design: Survey data was collected with new graduate nurses over a 5-year period, beginning in 2004 and ending in 2008. A total of 348 new graduate nurses were surveyed in eastern Canada.

Results: The results showed that 49.6% of the new graduate nurses did not intend to leave their current employer, whereas 4.9% were definitely planning to leave and 45.5% expressed different levels of uncertainty. Regression analysis indicated that a component of the work environment, foundations for quality nursing care, and a component of psychological empowerment, goal internalization explained, 24% of the variance of intent to leave.

Conclusion: This study provides a more comprehensive understanding of factors that influence intent to leave. It also supports the importance of a good working environment for the retention of new graduate nurses.

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What is already known about the topic?

- The first year of work is difficult and challenging for new graduate nurses.
- Many new graduates consider leaving their employer after the first year of work.
- Given the evidence available, the reasons why new graduate nurses intend to leave their current employer vary.

What this paper adds

- New graduate nurses who are able to practise according to a nursing model and internalize their organization's goals are less likely to leave their employers.
- This study highlights the importance of work environment with respect to new graduate nurse retention.

1. Introduction

The transition period from the educational setting to the workplace is challenging and stressful for new graduate nurses (Oermann and Garvin, 2002; Newton and McKenna, 2006; Boychuk Duchscher, 2008). Many

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factors within the work environment contribute to increased levels of stress, such as, the fear of making mistakes (Boychuk Duchscher, 2001), interactions with physicians (Casey et al., 2004; Oermann and Moffitt-Wolf, 1997) and a lack of support within the workplace (Gerrish, 2000). New graduates must adapt to an environment where the values acquired in school are not those that predominate in the workplace (Boychuk Duchscher, 2001). Frequently, many young nurses describe interpersonal conflicts during the first year at work, such as bullying and conflicts with other nurses (Gardner, 1992; Thomka, 2001; Kelly and Ahern, 2008). Forty-one percent of the respondents in a survey of 551 new graduate nurses in New Zealand experienced abusive and humiliating behaviours from their nursing colleagues (McKenna et al., 2003).

New graduate nurses also face a complex work environment with limited resources and heavy workloads. The retention of nurses under these circumstances is quite challenging. A recent study revealed that 61.5% of the new graduate nurses surveyed in Québec, Canada, intended to leave their current position (Lavoie-Tremblay et al., 2008). Although not specific to new graduate nurses, employment data indicates that, in 2004, the proportion of Canadian nurses between the ages of 25 and 34 who did not renew their license in the same province or territory was between a low of 2% to a high of 22%, depending upon the region (CIHI, 2006). Rural areas, in particular, have difficulty retaining nurses. In 2001, 9% of nurses between the ages of 20 and 29 moved from rural to urban areas (CIHI, 2007). There is also a tendency for nurses to migrate from less populated provinces in eastern Canada to more populated provinces in central and western Canada, where the economy is stronger. The turnover rate among new graduate nurses and young nurses is not unique to Canada. In Aiken's study of nurses in five countries, 33% of nurses younger than 30 planned to leave in less than 1 year (Aiken et al., 2001), while, in the UK, one-third of newly qualified nurses do not register (ICN, 2003). Unlike hospitals in urban settings, hospitals in rural settings are particularly affected by even small fluctuations in staff turnover. Given these stark employment trends, gaining a better understanding of the reasons new graduate nurses may want to leave is imperative. This study provides a profile of new graduate nurses in a region of eastern Canada with a considerable rural population and examines the factors influencing their intent to leave.

Issues surrounding the transition period are not specific to North America as several international studies describe the difficulties encountered during the first year of work (Kelly and Ahern, 2008; Wangensteen et al., 2008). In an Australian study, Chang and Hancock (2003) found that 154 new graduates experienced role stress due to both role ambiguity (lack of understanding work expectations) and role overload (inadequate time to complete work). A qualitative study in the UK, comparing two cohorts of nurses from 1985 and 1998 concluded that new nurse graduates continued to feel inadequately prepared for their role within the workplace (Gerrish, 2000). The transition period may also be influenced by the particularities of practice settings. Nurses working in rural areas, for instance, require a broad range of skills and generally

practise with little medical support (Sloan et al., 2006; Lea and Cruickshank, 2007). Their educational preparation is sometimes considered inadequate because of the advanced skills required within practice (MacLeod et al., 2004). Specific reasons why new graduate nurses consider leaving their employer are discussed in the following literature review.

2. Literature review

The search strategy used for the literature review contained two components. The first was a computerized search to obtain relevant articles from the following databases: CINAHL, Medline, Sociological Abstracts and PsychINFO. Keywords used were the following 'new graduate nurse', 'retention', 'turnover', 'intent to quit', 'intent to stay', 'orientation program', 'work environment', 'work conditions' and 'empowerment'. The second component involved accessing unpublished literature from professional nursing associations and nursing workforce research groups. Articles that met the following criteria were used: (1) the language of the article was English or French; (2) research used quantitative or qualitative data. Editorial articles and opinion papers were not included in the review.

Several terms are used to measure turnover intention, such as 'intent to quit', 'intent to leave' and 'intent to stay'. These terms reflect nurses' desire to leave their employer, or alternatively, nurses' desire to stay with their employer. Regardless of the terminology used, turnover intent is generally a good predictor of turnover (Hayes et al., 2006). Studies also differ in whether they examine nurses' intent to leave their employer versus nurses' intent to leave the profession altogether. The range of turnover definitions makes the comparison of studies quite challenging (Hayes et al., 2006). For consistency, we will use the term 'intent to leave' in this paper.

2.1. Transition programs

New graduate nurses require a work environment that will assist them through the transition period by providing the support and guidance needed (Boychuk Duchscher, 2008; Laschinger et al., 2009). Comprehensive transition programs (e.g. orientation, preceptorship program, mentorship program) as well as environments that have adequate resources and on-going educational opportunities facilitate new nurses' experiences (Gillis et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2008). The significance of transition programs is highlighted in turnover and retention studies (Marcum and West, 2004). In a review of interventions to increase the retention of new nurse graduates, Salt et al. (2008) found that the highest retention rates were reported in hospitals which had a preceptorship program responding to the needs of new nurses. The length of transition programs may also influence nurse retention (Gerrish, 2000; Squires, 2002; Scott et al., 2008). The evaluation of several hospital-based transition programs suggested that a minimum of 12 weeks is necessary for the successful integration of the new graduate nurse (Delaney, 2003; Salt et al., 2008). Yet not all new graduates receive an adequate transition program responding to their needs (Lea and

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