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Original Article

Examining perception of job satisfaction and intention to leave among ICU nurses in China



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Previous studies in mainland China found ICU nurses to be less satisfied with their jobs and more inclined to leave them than are nurses in other hospital units. We aimed to determine ICU nurses' perspectives on the factors that influence job satisfaction and whether or not to continue working in the ICU.

Methods: Nine ICU nurses were asked five open-ended questions to elicit the nurses' perspectives on job satisfaction and intentions to leave. Data were analyzed according to the process described by Knafl and Webster (1988). Core concepts were identified using the constant comparative method.

Results: Two themes emerged as major influences on job dissatisfaction: 1) stress experienced from excessive workload demands and the ICU work environment, and 2) a lack of respect and recognition for the nurses' work. Two themes emerged as major influences on job satisfaction: 1) recognition of work, and 2) professional opportunities and relationships with coworkers. The effects of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction on the nurses' intentions to leave their jobs varied, although three categories were identified.

Conclusions: For ICU nurses in China, sources of job dissatisfaction are potentially remedied with simple interventions. Adequate staffing is necessary but not sufficient for a positive work environment. Administrators should address the factors that directly affect their nurses' levels of job satisfaction, as it will ultimately result in less staff turnover and greater patient care.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research questions

The shortage of hospital staff nurses has become a worldwide concern. In mainland China, the shortage of nurses is more severe than in most other countries. In 2005, investigators conducted a survey of nurses in Shanghai, China, and determined that the number of nurses who had either left nursing or were going to leave nursing accounted for more than 50% of the nurse population [1].

Several studies of Chinese nurses found intensive care unit (ICU) nurses' job satisfaction to be much lower than that of nurses working in other hospital units. ICU nurses also had a greater intention to leave their jobs [2,3]. ICUs provide the most acute level of medical care for patients, as they are critically ill and require intensive care and monitoring. Dissatisfaction among ICU nurses is serious because it will lead to a decrease in the quality of care for the most critically ill patients [2]. The nurses who work in these units need specialty training over and above that of nurses working in other units, so a high rate turnover in ICU nurse staffing also has cost consequences. Understanding why ICU nurses are unhappy in their jobs is critical in developing strategies to improve job satisfaction and retain these nurses. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of ICU nurses' perspectives on the factors that may influence their job satisfaction and their intentions to leave their jobs. The specific questions were: (1) What do ICU nurses find dissatisfying in their job? (2) What do ICU nurses find satisfying in their job? (3) What would cause ICU nurses to consider leaving their job?

1.2. The nurses' work environment

Based on the author's personal experience, nursing work in China may be different from nursing work in other countries regarding the number of hours worked, the work environment, pay, and job responsibilities. In China, hospital staff nurses, including those working in ICUs, are expected to work full-time and rotate shifts from days to evenings to nights. Staffing shortages result in heavy overtime work as well as irregular and unpredictable schedules. The nurses are assigned to work in various hospital units depending on each unit's need, which does not allow nurses a voice in the selection of their work units. All hospital staff nurses, including those working in ICUs, earn the same rate of pay regardless of the unit in which they work. The nurses have a low salary but receive a monthly bonus, which at times is equal to or more than their monthly salary. The amount of the bonus is based on a performance evaluation conducted by a department committee comprised of the department director, the head nurse, and a medical staff member, usually a physician.

Another unique aspect of the Chinese hospital system is that the regulation of health service delivery is largely decentralized; there are no standardized policies or monitoring systems that apply to all hospitals. Instead, numerous agencies are involved in regulating quality and safety, including the Ministry of Health, provincial and city governments, and the military. Even large state enterprises that

operate their own hospitals conduct inspections to assure compliance with multiple regulations [4]. This decentralization results in hospitals, especially ICUs, receiving frequent inspections from a variety of supervising organizations.

ICU nurses have additional challenges beyond those faced by nurses in general. Unlike other hospital units, ICUs are not open to visitors; therefore, ICU nurses are unable to communicate with patients' families. Moreover, ICU nurses are responsible for their patients' basic care and activities of daily living, unlike nurses working in other units.

1.3. Job satisfaction and intent to leave

Job satisfaction, defined as the degree to which an employee enjoys his/her job, is important because it has a strong inverse relationship with the employee's turnover intention – that is, the higher the level of job satisfaction, the more likely an employee is to remain on the job [5–7]. Turnover intention, as described by Porter and Steers [8], is a state of mind that can occur in an employee when he/she experiences substantial dissatisfaction. Turnover intention is generally considered to be the best indicator for predicting employee turnover behavior [9].

Determining the level of job satisfaction among nurses in China and the factors contributing to job satisfaction, intention to leave, and job turnover have been the focus of several studies [3,6,10]. Researchers examining these factors have relied primarily on the collection of quantitative data from self-administered survey questionnaires. In a series of studies conducted with nurses in Shanghai [11] and Shandong province [3], researchers examined nurses' job satisfaction in order to develop intervention strategies to reduce turnover intention. These studies revealed that nurses working in ICUs were significantly less satisfied with their jobs than were nurses in other hospital units. Zhang and colleagues [3] reported that ICU nurses were younger and had lower levels of education, less time on the job, lower professional rank, and lower levels of overall job satisfaction compared to ward nurses.

2. Methods

2.1. Procedures

The procedures followed in this qualitative study included: recruiting a small number of ICU nurse participants, developing interview questions, conducting audio-taped interviews, analyzing the responses to identify themes and categories, and collecting data until data saturation occurred.

2.2. Participants and settings

Nine nurses currently employed in ICUs from four hospitals in Shanghai participated in the study. The four hospitals were selected from eight hospitals that participated in an earlier study examining job satisfaction [12]. At the outset of this study, three staff nurses from each hospital were selected to participate, based on the recommendation of the nursing director in each hospital and the following criteria: (1) more than three years of work experience; (2) no less than one year

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