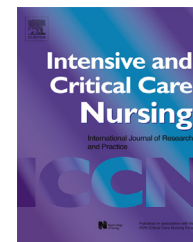




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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Working together: critical care nurses experiences of temporary staffing within Swedish health care: A qualitative study

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KEYWORDS

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Summary

Objectives: The aim of this study is to describe critical care nurses (CCN's) experiences of working with or as temporary agency staff.

Research methodology: This explorative qualitative study is based on interviews with five agency CCNs and five regular CCNs, a total of ten interviews, focusing on the interviewees' experiences of daily work and temporary agency staffing. The interviews were analysed manually and thematically following an inductive approach.

Findings: Four themes that illustrate both similarities and differences between regular and temporary agency CCNs emerged: "working close to patients versus being responsible for everything", "teamwork versus independence", "both groups needed" and "opportunities and challenges".

Conclusion: The study findings illustrate the complexity of the working situation for agency and regular staff in terms of the organisation and management of the temporary agency nurses and the opportunities and challenges faced by both groups.

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Implications for Clinical Practice

- Indicates the importance of addressing the following questions: What is the formal expectation from the organisation (i.e. job description) of agency CCNs and regular critical care nurses (CCN's) and how do they differ?
- What working tasks should agency CCNs manage? Are they supposed to take part in different kinds of alarms and supervise students? What kinds of equipment are they expected to use?
- Pay attention to whose responsibility is it to provide professional updates and continuing education to the agency CCNs.

Introduction

The work environment for critical care nurses (CCNs) can be stressful, as it requires safely operating various kinds of medical and technical equipment (Tunlind et al., 2015). CCNs also care for patients with life threatening illness or injury and for relatives in need of support and information (Engström, 2008). CCNs are not only expected to work independently to implement appropriate care for patients (Gardner et al., 2007; Lakanmaa et al., 2012) but also to collaborate with other staff to ensure quality care and patient safety (Kalisch et al., 2010). In addition, CCNs must focus on the personal, individual and human perspectives of nursing care when meeting with patients and their relatives (Cronqvist et al., 2001). This study investigated CCNs in the Swedish healthcare system, a service that is experiencing increased temporary agency staffing due to a shortage of nurses in many county councils and the fact that more nurses are choosing to work for staffing agencies rather than for specific intensive care units (ICUs). The shortage of nurses, especially in specialised areas such as ICUs, can be described as a global problem (Jooste and Prinsloo, 2013) and the use of nursing agencies as an international trend. Thus, the aim of this study was to describe CCNs' experiences of working with, or as temporary agency staff.

Background

Previous research illustrates how temporary agency staffing not only affects agency staff CCNs but also regular staff and client organisations (Bryson, 2013; Håkansson and Isidorsson, 2012; Koene et al., 2014). Indeed, it has been emphasised that research needs to focus on how regular CCNs experience temporary staffing (Manias et al., 2003a). However, few qualitative studies address specific occupational groups in the temporary workforce (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2013); therefore, it is both timely and necessary to improve the understanding of how CCNs experience temporary agency staffing. Unlike other occupational groups within the temporary workforce i.e., low-skilled jobs and peripheral positions (Burgess and Connell, 2006), nurses belong to a profession that requires significant training and education. They also play an important role in the development of healthcare evidenced by a connection between the nurses' competence and the quality of care (Aiken et al., 2014; Hallin, 2009).

A Swedish CCN must complete at least four years of university studies, the last year devoted to specialist training in intensive care nursing. However, professional development for nurses is a life-long process. In addition to formal edu-

cation and experience, conditions in the work place and the work organisation influence professional development (Ellström, 1992; Hallin, 2009). For example, the professional relationships established among nurses help develop professional identity, knowledge and competence (Fagermoen, 1997; Jansson and Parding, 2011).

As with regular nurses, there is a shortage of specialist nurses such as CCNs in Swedish county councils due to retention and recruitment issues (Socialstyrelsen, 2014), problems that have required the use of temporary agency staff. If this trend continues, there will be a serious shortage of specialised nurses in Sweden by 2035 (Statistics Sweden, 2015). During 2013, the costs for hiring agency nurses increased in a majority of the county councils (Mirsch, 2014). According to the Swedish Association of Health Professionals, this increase is partly due to poor and deteriorating working conditions for nurses. Indeed, nurses experience frustration at work and report high levels of burnout symptoms, causing them to leave or consider leaving the profession (Gustavsson et al., 2013). At the same time, adequate nurse staffing is emphasised as essential not only for quality patient care to be delivered but also "... important in terms of its contribution to job satisfaction and the retention of personnel in the nursing service" (Jooste and Prinsloo, 2013; 1). Clearly, it is highly relevant to explore how CCNs experience the increased level of agency staffing.

In Sweden, since 1993 it has been legal for both private and public employers to use hired staff (Swedish Code of Statutes, 1993:440). The phenomenon of temporary agency staffing within Swedish healthcare resembles how the use of flexible labour relations has increased in most developed countries (Koene et al., 2014). Despite differences between countries due to different employment regulations, temporary agency work can be characterised as a 'triangular' relationship between staffing agency, worker and client organisation (Håkansson and Isidorsson, 2012). As such, agency workers have relationships with several organisations; the individual employees have no guaranteed fixed workplace, but must be willing to work at various client companies/organisations.

A review of the literature on the psychosocial work environment for agency workers shows that agency workers in general experience higher risk of exposure to unhealthy psychosocial work environment (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2013), such as fewer opportunities for learning in terms of continuing education (Allvin et al., 2003; Charnley and Arnold, 2006; Peerson et al., 2002). In line with this, research has recognised a need to provide feedback and professional development opportunities for agency

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