

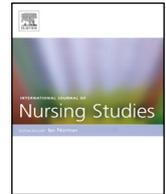


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Autonomous home-care nursing staff are more engaged in their work and less likely to consider leaving the healthcare sector. A questionnaire survey

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ABSTRACT

Background: The need for home care is rising in many Western European countries, due to the ageing population and governmental policies to substitute institutional care with home care. At the same time, a general shortage of qualified home-care staff exists or is expected in many countries. It is important to retain existing nursing staff in the healthcare sector to ensure a stable home-care workforce for the future. However, to date there has been little research about the job factors in home care that affect whether staff are considering leaving the healthcare sector.

Objective: The main purpose of the study was to examine how home-care nursing staff's self-perceived autonomy relates to whether they have considered leaving the healthcare sector and to assess the possible mediating effect of work engagement.

Design, setting and participants: The questionnaire-based, cross-sectional study involved 262 registered nurses and certified nursing assistants employed in Dutch home-care organisations (mean age of 51; 97% female). The respondents were members of the Dutch Nursing Staff Panel, a nationwide group of nursing staff members in various healthcare settings (67% response rate).

Methods: The questionnaire included validated scales concerning self-perceived autonomy and work engagement and a measure for considering pursuing an occupation outside the healthcare sector. Logistic regression and mediation analyses were conducted to test associations between self-perceived autonomy, work engagement and considering leaving the healthcare sector.

Results: Nursing staff members in home care who perceive more autonomy are more engaged in their work and less likely to have considered leaving the healthcare sector. The positive association between self-perceived autonomy and considering leaving, found among nursing staff members regardless of their level of education, is mediated by work engagement.

Conclusion: In developing strategies for retaining nursing staff in home care, employers and policy makers should target their efforts at enhancing nursing staff's autonomy, thereby improving their work engagement.

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What is already known about the topic?

- Most studies of job factors that are associated with turnover in nursing have been limited to hospital nurses.
- Nurses in home care attach great importance to autonomy.
- Previous studies described autonomy as an antecedent of nurses' work engagement.
- As yet, research on the consequences of nursing staff's work engagement has been scarce and has disregarded job outcomes, such as considering leaving the healthcare sector.

What this paper adds

- Self-perceived autonomy of home-care nursing staff is related to whether they have considered leaving the healthcare sector.
- This association applies to home-care nursing staff regardless of their level of education.
- Work engagement has a mediating role in the relationship between self-perceived autonomy and considering leaving the healthcare sector.

1. Introduction

Ensuring a sustainable workforce in home care is a challenge for many Western European countries. A general shortage of home-care nursing staff exists in several countries, while other countries expect a scarcity of qualified home-care staff in the future (Genet et al., 2013).

The need for home care is rising due to the growing number of elderly people, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of the population, and because informal care is becoming scarcer (Colombo et al., 2011; European Commission, 2013; Genet et al., 2013; OECD, 2013). In addition, many OECD countries have developed policies to substitute institutional care with home care in response to people's preference for receiving care at home, as a measure for curbing the rapid growth in healthcare expenditure and helped by technological developments that further enable home-based care (Ellenbecker et al., 2008; Genet et al., 2013; OECD, 2013).

Various measures can be taken to ensure a workforce that is sufficient to meet the rising demand for home care. Besides recruiting new home-care personnel and increasing productivity, it is important to retain current nursing staff and prevent them from leaving the healthcare sector. It would thus be useful to have a better understanding of the job factors in home care that affect home-care nursing staff's views on leaving the healthcare sector. This knowledge can help home-care employers and policy-makers take action to ensure a stable home-care workforce for the future.

Nurse turnover intention has frequently been the topic of research. Chan et al. (2013) conducted a systematic review on the intention to leave the current employment or the profession among registered nurses in hospitals. Hayes et al. (2012) reviewed recent literature on the intention to leave and actually leaving the organisation, unit/ward or the profession among registered nurses,

practical/enrolled nurses and assistant nurses working in hospitals, long-term care or community care. However, current knowledge of job factors that impact on intentions to leave home care is limited (Ellenbecker et al., 2008). Research on turnover in nursing has tended to focus on leaving the organisation rather than the sector (Chan et al., 2013) and on hospital nurses (Hayes et al., 2012). For example, the recent systematic literature review by Chan et al. (2013) showed that lack of autonomy is associated with hospital nurses' intention to leave. However, these results cannot automatically be extrapolated to nursing staff in the home-care sector (Neal-Boylan, 2006). For instance, home-care nursing staff may take more autonomous decisions in caring for their clients than nursing staff in hospital do.

This paper therefore focuses on the role of home-care nursing staff's self-perceived autonomy in considering leaving the healthcare sector. There is still no commonly accepted definition of autonomy in the nursing context (Varjus et al., 2011). Ellenbecker (2004), who has described a theoretical model of job retention for home-care nurses, has defined autonomy as independence and freedom of initiative in a job. We use this definition of autonomy in this paper.

A large-scale survey of the impact of job characteristics on intent to leave the organisation among nurses in nursing homes, care homes and home care established that autonomy is particularly important for nurses in home care (Tummers et al., 2013). When autonomy was reduced, home-care nurses were more likely to leave the organisation. However, it remains unclear whether low self-perceived autonomy is also an important reason for home-care nursing staff to consider leaving the healthcare sector. A more thorough understanding of this would help in particular in developing policies to guarantee a nursing workforce that can meet the demand for home care in the longer term. Therefore, the first objective of this paper is to provide insight into the association between the self-perceived autonomy of nursing staff in home care and whether they are considering leaving the healthcare sector.

In this regard, the paper also addresses whether there is a possible moderating effect of educational level on the association between self-perceived autonomy and considering leaving. A meta-analytic study of factors related to hospital nurses' intention to stay at or leave their jobs, performed by Yin and Yang (2002), showed a positive relationship between hospital nurses' educational level and autonomy. Alexander et al. (1982) suggest that nurses with a bachelor's degree are socialised to expect autonomy in their work environment. It can therefore be assumed that nursing staff with a higher level of education would be more dissatisfied than other nursing staff if they perceive a lack of autonomy, and would therefore be more likely to leave the healthcare sector.

Furthermore, this paper examines whether work engagement has a mediating effect on the relationship between self-perceived autonomy and considering leaving the healthcare sector. A frequently cited definition of work engagement is "a positive, fulfilling, and work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and

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