



Perceptions and employment intentions among aged care nurses and nursing assistants from diverse cultural backgrounds: A qualitative interview study



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 June 2015

Received in revised form 20 August 2015

Accepted 20 August 2015

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Long term care workforce

Employment intention

Nurse

Nursing assistant

Cultural diversity

Qualitative study

ABSTRACT

The residential aged care industry faces shortages and high turnover rates of direct care workers. This situation is further complicated by the increasing cultural diversity of residents and staff. To retain direct care workers, it is crucial to explore their perceptions of the rewards and difficulties of care work, and their employment intentions in multicultural environments. A qualitative descriptive study was used to understand perceptions of the rewards and difficulties of residential aged care work for core direct care workers (i.e. nurses and nursing assistants), how these were related to their intentions to stay or leave, and how these varied between nurses and nursing assistants, and between locally and overseas born workers. Individual interviews were conducted between June and September 2013 with 16 direct care workers in an Australian residential aged care facility with a specific focus on people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. It was found that direct care workers' employment intentions were related to their perceptions and management of the rewards and difficulties of care work. Their experiences of care work, the employment characteristics, and the organizational resources that fitted their personality, ability, expectations, and essential needs were viewed as rewards. Evaluating their jobs as meaningful was a shared perception for direct care workers who intended to stay. Individual workers' perceptions of the rewarding aspects of care work served to counterbalance the challenges of care work, and promoted their intentions to stay. Perceptions and employment intentions varied by occupational groups and by cultural backgrounds. Overseas born direct care workers are valuable resources in residential aged care facility rather than a limitation, but they do require organizational support, such as cultural awareness of the management, English language support, a sense of family, and appropriate job responsibility. The findings indicated that aged care policy makers and service providers should understand the range of individual direct care workers' positive and negative perceptions, and their employment intentions within the context of their roles and their cultural backgrounds.

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Introduction

The shortage of direct care workers (DCWs) in the residential aged care⁴ industry has fuelled a groundswell of international interest in their employment intentions (i.e. to stay or leave their

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⁴ Residential aged care is also called nursing home care in the literature.

employers) (Colombo, Llena-Nozal, Mercier, & Tjadens, 2011). In the coming decades, the residential aged care industry in the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Australia, will experience serious challenges in developing a sufficient direct care workforce with appropriate skill mix to cater for escalating needs of a diverse and growing aging population (Chenoweth, Merlyn, Jeon, Tait, & Duffield, 2014; Rosen, Stiehl, Mittal, & Leana, 2011; Szczepura, 2011). Staff shortages and high turnover rates among DCWs are also documented, and linked to increased costs and reduced quality of care (Castle & Engberg, 2005; Duffield, Roche, Homer, Buchan, & Dimitrelis, 2014; Hayes et al., 2006; Karantzas et al., 2012; Spilsbury, Hewitt, Stirk, & Bowman, 2011).

Effectively addressing staff shortages and staff turnover is further complicated by the rising numbers of older residents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds requiring culturally appropriate care (Howe, 2009). In 2026, about 25% of older Australians aged 80 and older are expected to be from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Gibson, Braun, Benham, & Mason, 2001). To address staff shortages and expanding care demands, the residential aged care industry in the US, the UK, and Australia seeks to attract overseas born DCWs (Martin, Lowell, Gzodziak, Bump, & Breeding, 2009; Productivity Commission, 2011; Shutes, 2012). As a result, the residential aged care sector is increasingly culturally diverse. Shutes (2012) argues that this impacts on worker turnover and employment intentions. To reduce turnover of DCWs in current multicultural environments, it is crucial to explore their perceptions of care work and employment intentions, as employment intentions are strong predictors of actual turnover (Karantzas et al., 2012).

This Australian qualitative study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on employment intentions of DCWs, which is especially relevant for countries where residential aged care has similar organizational and employment characteristics. The core DCW workforce constitutes registered nurses and nursing assistants (also called assistants in nursing or personal carers). This study simultaneously investigated nursing assistants, an understudied group who in Australian residential aged care facilities provide the majority of direct care, and nurses. As residency status and cultural and linguistic backgrounds strongly impact on DCWs' employment intentions (Howe, 2009; Shutes, 2012), this study differentiated the participants as either "Australian born DCWs" or "overseas born DCWs from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with either Australian citizenship or permanent residency" (abbreviated as "overseas born DCWs" in this paper). This is one of the first studies to examine the perspectives of overseas born DCWs in residential aged care sector. It sheds light on variations in the perceptions and employment intentions of different groups of DCWs (e.g. nurses vs. nursing assistants; overseas born DCWs vs. others) in a multicultural environment. Findings from this study may inform the development of policies and programs to improve retention of different groups of DCWs - a key issue for the residential aged care industry.

Background

The residential aged care system in Australia delivers long-term care services for eligible older Australians in residential facilities located in major cities and regional and

remote areas. National assessment teams assess the eligibility of older people based on inability to meet care needs at home (Department of Health and Ageing, 2009). At the time when this research was conducted, older people were assessed as requiring a low level of daily assistance (i.e. accommodation, personal and social care, and domestic assistance) or a high level of care (i.e. intensive nursing services in addition to daily assistance) (Howe, 2009; Marshall & Mackenzie, 2008). Most permanent residents (76%) require high level care and 52% have dementia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013). Funding for these services comes from both government and means-tested user contributions (Department of Health and Ageing, 2012). The residential aged care facilities are owned and run by not-for-profit, private for-profit and government organizations (Productivity Commission, 2011). To accommodate the special needs of older people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, 25.5% of facilities specialize in delivering care for older adults from a particular cultural or ethnic group (King et al., 2012).

By 2047, about 25% of Australians will be aged 65 and older, with the age cohort of 85 and older rising from less than 2% of the population in 2012 to more than 5%, suggesting that there will be a rapid rise in people with high dependency needs (Department of Health and Ageing, 2012). Given the population trend, the demand for DCWs is expected to about triple by 2050 (Colombo et al., 2011). However, the residential aged care industry is experiencing high turnover of DCWs (Colombo et al., 2011).

To compensate for the current shortage of DCWs and to meet the special needs of residents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, the attraction and retention of overseas born DCWs is a policy imperative of the Australian Government (Productivity Commission, 2011). In 2012, the number of overseas born DCWs occupied about 23% of the total DCW workforce in Australia (King et al., 2012). Similarly, in European countries and the US, there is a high representation of non-native born DCWs in the residential aged care industry, where they are playing an increasingly important role (Anderson, 2012; Martin et al., 2009). While some research (e.g. Walsh & O'Shea, 2010) identified overseas born DCWs as a concern for providing quality care for residential aged care residents due to language and communication barriers, others have reported that overseas born DCWs have applied their language capacity and cultural knowledge to provide optimal care for residents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Richardson & Martin, 2004). There is a need to understand overseas born DCWs' perspectives on the rewards and challenges associated with delivering quality care. However, little research has explored the perceptions and employment intentions of this group, especially in the Australian context.

Direct care workers are numerically the foundation of the aged care workforce (King et al., 2012). Nurses have comprehensive responsibilities, including supervising nursing assistants, management of residential aged care facilities, providing assessments of residents, producing documentation, communication with residents' families, assisting doctors with residents' health care, and offering skilled nursing care (Gao, Newcombe, Tilse, Wilson, & Tuckett, 2014). In contrast, the nursing assistants' job involves more physical work, and is mainly comprised of personal care, social care and domestic

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