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Predictors of Job Satisfaction of Nurses and Allied Health Professionals

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The nation's health care system has undergone significant changes over the past decade as providers, insurers and employers attempt to control the spiraling cost of care. These changes have resulted in what a recent report from the American Hospital Association called a "major national health care crisis." They indicated that shortages exist in nearly every type of hospital job, and that the current shortage is long-term and severe. This shortage reflects, among other things, a change in career expectation and attitudes about work and worker dissatisfaction within health care.[1]

Given this crisis, it is important to discover the true magnitude of these shortages on the way health professionals feel about their jobs. Gaining an understanding of the satisfaction level of employees can be an important indication of the health of an organization, as well as a portent of decisions by employees regarding their work contributions and future career plans. This matter is particularly important in times of shortages since some researchers suggest that job dissatisfaction, over a period of time, can result in burnout and eventually, turnover.[2-3] Job dissatisfaction resulting in burnout and turnover will exacerbate the current shortages, result in serious understaffing of health care facilities, and have a negative impact on the quality of patient care.[4]

In order to determine the extent to which one group of nurses and allied health professionals have been affected by the changes in the health care system, a survey of alumni was conducted by the Center for Collaborative Research in the Jefferson College of Health Professions. The Health Care Environment Survey, developed for a previous study, was used to collect data.[5] The survey was mailed to 691 graduates of the classes of 1988 to 1990 and 919 graduates of the classes of 1993 to 1995. The disciplines participating were nursing, dental hygiene, occupational therapy, physical therapy, laboratory sciences, and diagnostic imaging. These alumni, who had at least five years of experience in their fields, were asked what they saw as both positive and negative changes in the healthcare system in the years they had been in practice. They were then asked to describe their level of satisfaction with their current job and their profession overall. Finally, they were asked if they would still enter the health field if they had it to do over again and if they were planning on changing jobs soon. Responses were received from 787 individuals for a response rate of 49%.

Respondents reported many more negative changes than positive changes in the healthcare system. They indicated that, in the years they had been in practice, there was a significant increase in their workload, the amount of paper work they were required to do, and the extent to which insurance companies controlled the delivery of health care. They also felt they had less job security and less time to spend with their patients, and they believed that there was an overall decrease in the quality of care patients were receiving.

In spite of these negative changes, the respondents reported that, overall, they were satisfied with their jobs and career (86%) and were not presently looking for another job. In fact, if they had it to do all over again, the majority would choose either the same career or one in a related health field (80%).

When a stepwise regression was conducted to determine factors that were associated with job satisfaction, eleven variables emerged, with four accounting for the largest percentage of the variance. The most important variable was the feeling of worthwhile accomplishment respondents received from their jobs (R2 = .46). The second most important was satisfaction with the workload, increasing the R2 to .57. The remaining two, the opportunities for personal growth and recognition they received, increased the R2 to .64. These findings were consistent across all of the professions studied.

These findings appear inconsistent with other published findings. For example, Aiken,[6] in her study of nurses in five countries, found that potential turnover was reported as being extremely high in four of the five countries. More than three in 10 nurses in England and Scotland and more than two in 10 in the U.S. reported that they planned on leaving their jobs within the next year. In Pennsylvania, she found that 40% of hospital nurses reported being dissatisfied with their jobs and were three to four times more likely than the average U.S. worker to be unhappy with their positions. Magee and Hojat[7] found that almost a quarter of the 400 physicians interviewed indicated that they would not choose medicine as a career again.

The findings in this study present a slightly more promising and positive picture. They also underscore the value of the more intrinsic factors in job satisfaction. The jobs themselves provide these professionals with opportunities for a great deal of satisfaction and have the potential to reduce the likelihood of burnout and eventually turnover. Workload, however, is a crucial factor. If employers continue to try to save money by increasing the workload of these nursing and allied health professionals, a critical point will be reached, leading to increased frustration with not being able to do their job, and the opportunities for having a satisfying career will be less and less.

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