

Reasons for entering and leaving nursing: an Australian regional study

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KEY WORDS

Nurses, retention, recruitment, career choice, survey

ABSTRACT

Objective

To compare and contrast the reasons that nurses and nursing students provide for entering and leaving nursing.

Design

A quantitative cross-sectional cohort design with online survey.

Setting

Regional public health service district and regional university nursing school.

Subjects

Nurses (n= 272) and nursing students (n=259).

Main outcome measures

Demographics of nurses and nursing students including age, sex and length of time as a nurse, and reasons for entering and leaving the profession.

Results

Among the nurses 88.4% were female and 37% 50 years of age or older. Almost half (45.3%) of the nursing students were 30 years of age or older and 44.1% of all students were working as nursing assistants or enrolled nurses whilst studying. Of these working students 32.5% had been nursing in excess of five years. Self interest, vocation and altruism were identified by both students and nurses as the main reasons for entering nursing. Respondents above and below 30 years of age gave the same reasons for entering nursing. Choice of factors for considering leaving nursing differed between groups and ages. Compared to students, nurses were most likely to cite *disillusionment with nursing*. Students under 30 years of age indicated *pursuit of another career* and *starting a family* to be the major factors while older students offered *disillusionment with nursing* and *health concerns*.

Conclusions

Retention strategies may need to differ for the age of nurse. However, recruitment needs to be informed by the altruistic and vocational reasons why nurses and nursing students are drawn to nursing rather than focussing on perceived generational differences.

INTRODUCTION

Despite recent increases the Australian nursing workforce continues to be undersupplied (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008; Iliffe and Kearney 2006) and shortages are predicted to increase (Davis 2008; Gaynor et al 2007). From 2010 yearly demand is expected to be 10,000 new nurse graduates with a shortfall of 4,000 (Australian Health Workforce Advisory Committee 2004).

Absolute workforce numbers are influenced by determinants that may be grouped into the areas of recruitment, turnover and retention. Past studies have identified numerous influencing factors from the tangible such as pay, workload, convenience and family responsibilities, to the intangible such as job satisfaction, status and psychological rewards (e.g. see Eley et al 2007).

Reported reasons for entering nursing include caring for people, vocation, rewarding career, stepping stone to another career, family history of working in health, career security, previous work or socialisation experiences, job satisfaction, and interest in medicine or biology (Price 2009; Coombs et al 2007; Duffield et al 2004; Mills and Blaesing 2000; Fagerberg et al 1997; Foskett and Hemsley-Brown 1997; Wright and Sumar 1996; Land 1994; Murray and Chambers 1990). Altruism is a common theme throughout the studies.

A few studies have addressed the question of retention i.e. why nurses stay in nursing, and have identified multiple and varied factors. These include personal fulfilment, charity, professional development, attainment of seniority, stable and merit-based work environment, adequate staffing, high nurse to patient ratios, good community relationship, and autonomy (Donoghue and Castle 2006; Murrell-McMillan 2006; Cangelosi 2005, Anderson et al 2004; Duffield et al 2004, Francis et al 1992).

In order to determine factors which may influence departure from nursing most studies have measured intent. Variables contained within the categories of personal history (age, education), workplace (staffing, relationships), nursing practice

(autonomy), employment conditions (pay, professional development), job satisfaction (appreciation, psychological rewards) and safety (abuse, violence) have been identified (Morrell et al 2008; Eley et al 2007; Farrell et al 2006; Tourangeau and Cranley 2006; Summer and Townsend-Rocchiccioli 2003; Aiken et al 2002; Duffield and Franks 2002; Goodspeed 2002; Sochalski 2002).

Studies in the United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America have identified pay as an important factor to nurses leaving the profession (Sochalski 2002, Robinson et al 1999); however other studies in Australia, UK and Sweden suggest that pay is not a main factor affecting departure (Frijters et al 2007, Sjögren et al 2005; Duffield et al 2004, Morrell et al 2004, Nursing and Health Services Research Consortium 2001). Overall, results suggest that the reasons for leaving nursing are both variable and complex supporting the theory that a combination of factors brings nurses to the point where a single action – ‘the shock’ - tips the balance (Morrell 2005).

Over the last decade Generation Y has entered the workforce and Australia has experienced considerable economic fluctuations. We questioned whether the reasons nurses and nursing students enter and leave the profession would reflect those events. The study reported herein surveyed nurses and nursing students to determine their reasons for entering the profession, their intended retention and reasons that would influence departure. The paper also presents important information on the demographic profile of nursing students.

METHODS

Design

The study was undertaken in March 2009 and used a quantitative cross-sectional cohort design. Approval was obtained from both the university and health service ethics committees.

Participants

Potential participants were approximately 800 nurses (registered and enrolled nurses) employed in the public health services of a regional health service district of Queensland and 442 nursing

students enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing degree at a regional Queensland university. The health service and university invited participation by email to all their nurses and students, respectively. Recipients who chose to participate were instructed how to gain access to the on-line survey instrument.

Materials

The on-line instrument collected information on age, sex, nurse designation, main job, length of time as a nurse and anticipated time in nursing. Participants were also asked to identify up to three of 17 offered reasons for entering nursing and up to three of nine offered factors that would influence them to leave nursing. The offered options were created from prior surveys undertaken by the authors (Hegney et al 2008) and the extant literature.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics summarised the data. All comparisons were undertaken on an item-by-item basis and differences assessed by chi-square and Z-test for two proportions. An alpha level of 0.05 was required for significance.

FINDINGS

Response rate

It was not possible to determine the exact number of nurses who received the invitation to participate; however based on a maximum number of 800 the minimum response rate was 32.3% (n=259). For students the exact number of recipients was known and the response rate was 61.4% (n=272).

Demographic information

Respondents were predominantly female (table 1). Nurses were older; however 45.2% of the students were 30 years of age or older. Almost half of the students (44.1%) were working whilst studying, mostly on a part time or casual basis as enrolled nurses, or assistants in nursing/personal carers (AIN/PC). Working students were more likely to be older than non-working students ($\chi = 13.54$, df 4, $p=.009$). Overall nurses had been working longer than working students ($\chi = 164.61$, df 5, $p<.001$); however 32.5% and 17.6% of working students had been working in nursing in excess of five and ten years, respectively.

Table 1: Demographic information.

	Students		Nurses	
	n	%	n	%
Male	23	8.5	30	11.6
Female	249	91.5	229	88.4
Total	272	100.0	259	100.0
< 20 years	38	14.0	0	0
20 - 29 years	111	40.8	17	6.6
30 - 39 years	50	18.4	42	16.2
40 - 49 years	56	20.6	104	40.2
50 - 59 years	17	6.3	77	29.7
60 + years	0	0	19	7.3
Aboriginal/Torres Strait	11	4.1	3	1.2
Working in nursing	120	44.1	241	95.6
full time	18	15.5	136	56.0
part time	49	42.2	98	40.3
casual	49	42.2	9	3.7
Year worked as a nurse				
less than 1	22	19.3	4	1.6
1 - 2	29	25.4	0	0
2 - 5	26	22.8	13	5.3
5 - 10	17	14.9	27	10.9
10 - 15	9	7.9	28	11.3
over 15	11	9.7	175	70.8
Job position				
RN	0	0	210	85.9
EN	24	20.7	22	9.0
AIN/PC	87	74.9	5	2.0
other	5	4.8	5	2.0

Factors influencing decision to become a nurse

Each respondent could choose up to three of 17 offered factors. The same five factors associated with self interest, vocation and altruism were ranked highest by both students and nurses (table 2). The second set of factors (ranked 6-10) also ranked similarly between groups; however prospect for career progression was chosen by more students (29.2%) than nurses (10.0%; $z=5.386$, $p<.001$).

There were insufficient data to compare nurses under and over 30 years of age. With the exception of the response to *nursing is my vocation in life* comparison of nursing students above (n=149) and below 30 years of age (n=123) revealed no differences (in all cases $p>.1$) in factors for becoming a nurse. *Nursing vocation* was chosen by 32% of students under 30 years of age compared to 51% of students 30 years or older ($z=2.802$, $p=.005$).

Table 2: Factors influencing the decision to become a nurse.

Factor*	Student		Nurses		All	
	n	rank	n	rank	n	rank
I find the work interesting	122	1	121	1	243	1
Opportunity for caring	116	2	96	3	212	2
Opportunity to work with people**	94	4	109	2	203	3
Nursing is my vocation in life	101	3	78	4	179	4
Sense of giving to the community**	88	5	45	5	143	5
Prospects for career progression**	79	6	26	10	105	6
Flexibility of working hours	46	7	40	6	86	7
Financial incentives	45	8	35	8	80	8
Availability of employment	41	10	37	7	78	9
Job is suited to my lifestyle and responsibilities	42	9	29	9	71	10
No interest in any other type of employment	19	11	16	13	35	11
Relationships with colleagues in health sector	18	12	17	12	35	12
Teaching opportunities	17	13	18	11	35	13
Proximity to home	8	15	10	14	18	14
Opportunities to do research	15	14	3	16	18	15
Low confidence in looking for other employment	4	16	9	15	13	16
Child care reasons	1	17	1	17	2	17

* up to three options could be selected

** significant difference ($p < .05$) between nurses and students

Anticipated future time in nursing

The anticipated time in nursing (table 3) differed between the two groups ($\chi^2 = 98.546$, $df 5$, $p < .001$) with the main effect that students expect to be in nursing longer than the nurses.

Table 3: Anticipated future time in nursing.

Anticipated future time in nursing	Students		Nurses	
	n	%	n	%
less than 1 year	0	0	2	.8
1 - 2 years	5	1.9	5	2.1
2 - 5 years	12	4.7	39	16.2
5 - 10 years	15	5.8	64	26.6
10 - 15 years	42	16.3	50	20.7
Over 15	147	57.0	56	23.3
Unsure	37	14.3	24	10.0

Factors affecting decision to leave nursing

Respondents were asked to choose up to three of nine factors that would influence their decision to leave nursing. Results are presented in table 4 for the 154 students and 138 nurses who responded to the question. Choices were different between groups

for several of the factors. Nurses saw *disillusionment* as their highest factor, closely followed by *retirement*. *Career progression outside of nursing* was highest rated by students. *Health*, which was a factor for students to consider leaving nursing, was not ranked highly by nurses.

Table 4: Factors influencing respondents' decision to leave nursing.

Factors*	Students		Nurses	
	n	rank	n	rank
See career beyond nursing**	58	1	36	3=
Health concerns**	47	2	25	8
Family responsibilities	46	3	31	5
Plan to start a family**	41	4	12	9
Dislike of shift work	38	5	36	3=
Disillusionment with nursing**	36	6	77	1
Earn more money elsewhere	35	7	31	5
Retirement**	13	8	69	2
Nothing left to give**	12	9	29	7

* up to three options could be selected

** significant difference ($p < .05$) between students and nurses

Between working and non working students the only factor that differed was that for *disillusionment with nursing* with those who were working more likely to select this choice than those who were not working (20% vs 7.5%; $z=2.833$, $p=.005$).

Responses to several factors differed for students below 30 years of age compared to older students. The latter were more likely to choose *disillusionment with nursing* (18.6% vs 8.7%; $z=2.238$, $p=.025$) and *health concerns* (22.7% vs 12.7%; $z=2.012$, $p=.044$), while younger students chose *plan to start a family* (25.5% vs 2.4%; $z=5.12$, $p<.001$) and *career beyond nursing* (28.8% vs 12.1%; $z=3.19$, $p=.01$).

DISCUSSION

The study provides information from one region in Queensland. Although some the results will be of no surprise to the reader others may be, and should inform recruitment and retention strategies.

Surprisingly little is known about the demographics of the Australian student nursing population. It was this deficiency that prompted establishment of the Nurses and Midwives e-cohort study (<http://nurses.e-cohort.net/>). Our student population's age, sex and Indigenous representation are in agreement to those reported from the seven Queensland nursing schools in that study (Gaynor et al 2007). However the percentage of students with enrolled nurse qualifications was higher than in the two schools in the e-cohort study for which data were presented.

For the nurses demographics were comparable with those from studies of Queensland Nurses Union members (Hegney et al 2008) and with government data for Queensland (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008). Overall the data confirm an ageing and still predominately female workforce with little Indigenous representation.

There are recruitment implications to the opportunity for studying on a part time basis (Gaynor et al 2007). In keeping with trends observed anecdotally over many years, among the nursing students close to half are working part time in nursing. Whether work was for

financial reasons or to gain work experience was not determined, however was enabled by emphasis within the university on flexible study options designed to help students manage competing study, work and family obligations.

The fact that a third of students had been working in nursing in excess of five years is an important finding. One in five of the students who worked were ENs whilst 75% were working as AIN/PC; unregistered nurses who make up around 15% of Queensland's nursing workforce (Queensland Nurses' Union 2008). Enrolment of these nurses in a degree program could reflect success of renewed emphasis within the profession on better articulation of educational pathways. However as the specific motivation of these students to enrol in a registered nursing programme was not determined future research is required to confirm this.

The highest ranking factor for entering nursing was interest in the work followed by four altruistic factors. The latter were the highest ranked reasons for entering the profession in another Australian study (Duffield et al 2004).

The generally accepted belief is that Generation Y is different and wants more lifestyle choices than previous generations. It is implied that this will affect recruitment and retention of nurses (see for example Francis 2009; Jamieson 2009). However in our study there was remarkable consistency between the students and the nurses, and between students above and below 30 years of age in the ranking of the factors that influenced their decision to become a nurse. This is an important finding, and challenges assumptions that younger people will only be drawn to nursing if it offers them an appealing lifestyle.

These findings question recruitment messages formulated with consideration of likely differences between generations. Notions that young people are 'turned off' a career in nursing because supposedly old-fashioned values of altruism and vocation have no interest to them have led to tailoring nursing recruitment messages accordingly. These concepts appear in nursing recruitment

campaigns, such as Queensland's 'Think Nursing' (<http://www.thinknursing.com/>; accessed 15.01.10) where prospective nurses are told that nurses will enjoy financial rewards, professional and career development, a flexible workplace and a 'dream Aussie lifestyle'. Certainly these attributes are important recruitment messages; however the results of the current study suggest that the emphasis may need to be questioned. Perhaps, after all, young people are drawn to nursing for exactly the same reasons as previous generations. That is a desire to care for others. Planned in-depth interviews will explore this further.

Whilst accepting that intent to leave the profession does not necessarily equate to subsequent action (Morrell 2005), the questions we posed have been used in repeated studies in Queensland (see Hegney et al 2008 for citations), and provide the opportunity for comparison. Results in this study for intention to remain in nursing are comparable to those reported for 2001, 2004 and 2007 across Queensland (Hegney et al 2008).

Of particular interest was that over 40 percent of students anticipated staying in nurses less than 15 years. Given that over 90% of the students were under 50 and may be expected to be working for at least 15 years this projection is somewhat alarming and poses questions for retention strategies.

Personal factors for leaving largely concurred with other studies with main factors of raising a family and nursing seen as a stepping stone for a future career (Eley et al 2007; Sjögren et al 2005; Duffield and Franks 2002). However within the student cohort those who were older including many with nursing experience saw disillusionment and health as key factors. That health concerns was a projected reason for departure for the students and not the nurses is an area for which further study is planned.

CONCLUSIONS

It is essential for workforce planning that the factors contributing to recruitment and retention are known. Recruitment strategies should avoid unsupported assumptions about generational differences and

choice of careers, and instead focus on nursing as a career choice for those who want to care for others. Recruitment campaigns may need to be more clearly targeted to reflect these findings.

Trends to more mature aged students in nursing, and nursing students either having prior experience in nursing, or working in nursing whilst studying for their bachelor in nursing, suggest that retention strategies need to target all participants in nursing work, regardless of their status or extent of involvement in nursing.

Further, if nurses enter nursing because they want to care, then perhaps a subsequent decision to leave nursing because of a sense of disillusionment could mean that nursing work environment did not sufficiently allow or value a caring ethos. Retention strategies should identify and attend to the sense of disillusionment which leads nurses to leave nursing, in light of their reasons for entering nursing in the first place (a desire to care for others).

LIMITATIONS

In designing the study the authors were aware it would not be possible to ascertain the exact number of nurses receiving the invitation to participate because the survey had to be distributed by third parties. The intent of the study was to have enough subjects (estimated at 400) to make comparisons among students and nurses for a power of .80 at alpha .05. The authors received 531 responses with power greater than 0.99 which exceeded their estimation.

The study does have bias around the self-selected nature of participation and results reflect only the views of nurses and nursing students from one region in Queensland. Furthermore, as with any cross sectional study measuring variables at one point in time it cannot be assumed that the sample characteristics are constant.

Despite these limitations the data presented in this study do contribute to evidence about the future nursing workforce; evidence which has been noted as "central to ensuring appropriate workforce planning strategies" (Gaynor et al 2007).

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