

Healthy sleep and nursing

Sleep is often recognised as important for health and wellbeing but is often the first thing we give up when life gets busy. For nurses who undertake rotating shift work, this is especially true. Although some may think they are accustomed to short and irregular sleep schedules, others may accept poor sleep as inevitable, or be on the constant search to improve their sleep and reduce fatigue. But how important is sleep? And is healthy sleep even achievable for nurses who undertake rotating shift work?

Poor sleep among healthcare workers is a growing area of concern and interest. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased and highlighted the day-to-day demands of nursing and effects on sleep.¹ During the pandemic, the prevalence of sleep disturbances among healthcare workers and nursing students was 31% and 27% (respectively), compared to 18% of the general population.^{2,3} Given that sleep is important for cognitive, emotional and physical wellbeing,^{4,5} sleep may be especially important for nurses – a demanding profession that often requires shift work – a known risk factor for poor sleep.^{1,6}

Studies support the importance of sleep for nurses.⁷⁻⁹ Poor sleep has been associated with reduced quality of life, weight gain, hypertension, and diabetes among nurses.^{7,8,10-12} In addition to personal health concerns, poor sleep has also been associated with medical errors,¹³ reduced job productivity,⁹ and burnout.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Perhaps most concerning, studies suggest that although objective performance continues to decline with chronic partial sleep deprivation, subjective ratings of alertness level off.¹⁷ This means that an individual who is sleep deprived becomes less aware of how their performance has been impaired, in much the same way that a person who is intoxicated does not realise many of their cognitive and physical abilities are compromised.¹⁸

Fortunately, wellness programs that recognise the importance of sleep are being developed to support nurses. These programs are important to promote nurses' health and are strongly associated with patient safety and workforce sustainability.^{1,19-21} In Victoria, Australia, the six-week 'Happy People at Work' program, which promotes energy, mood, stress reduction, and sleep was piloted in 2017 among 874 nurses and midwives.²² The trial found 59% of 807 respondents reported that they gained strategies to help with sleep, although many (45%) reported that they were still learning how to effectively apply strategies. With the exception of sleep duration, the trial did not result in any

significant differences in self-reported sleep parameters. This pilot program seems to support the usefulness of a wellness intervention, but also perhaps highlights a deficiency in sleep knowledge, as well as challenges associated with implementing strategies that promote sleep.

There are thoughts that strategies to promote wellbeing and resilience should be developed early in a nurse's career.¹ However, many of these initiatives fail to identify the importance of sleep despite growing concerns of poor sleep during the graduate nurse year.¹ In a recent study of 88 newly graduated nurses working in a tertiary hospital in South Korea, Kim and Lee found a significant decline in subjective sleep quality over the first four months of undertaking shift work as a nurse, which was associated with a decline in quality of life.²³ Similarly, Donovan and colleagues reported emotional, physical and mental exhaustion was often attributed to sleep deprivation during the graduate year of nursing and midwifery.²⁴ Epstein and colleagues also explored sleep during the graduate year and found graduate nurses had limited and potentially counterproductive strategies to cope with fatigue.²⁵ Whether poor sleep continues, worsens, or improves during the nursing career remains unclear. It is possible that nurses who receive sleep education early in their undergraduate training may be less likely to experience poor sleep during their graduate year and future career.

To date, efforts to embed sleep education in the undergraduate curriculum of healthcare workers have largely focused on medical clinicians and medical students.²⁶ Understanding the importance of sleep and strategies to achieve a good night's sleep is particularly important for nurses because it is often not common knowledge and strategies for non-shift workers are often publicised. Not all strategies to promote a good night's sleep are realistic or feasible for a person undertaking shift work. For a nurse experiencing poor sleep, this may result in the development of counterproductive strategies or acceptance of poor sleep as a way of life. However, some strategies can be modified, and other strategies can be implemented to help a person undertaking shift work achieve better sleep. Given the importance of sleep for nurses and thoughts that sleep patterns and burnout may have origins at the student level, research is underway to explore these areas of interest to enhance student and new graduate nurses' awareness of sleep and its influences on health and work.

EDITORIAL

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