

# Rewards and challenges of a career in nursing



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## **Rewards and challenges of a career in nursing**

Nursing is often portrayed as a glamorous job and a career that many aspire to pursue. Like any other profession, a career in nursing has rewards and challenges. Nurses have the opportunity every day to make a difference in people's lives, to connect on a personal level with another human being, and to be part of a profession that has stood the test of time throughout the ages. Nursing is currently facing a crisis of a shortage of trained nurses. Hospitals and medical facilities must address the issues of nurse retention and increasing job satisfaction in order to overcome this crisis.

Many professions claim to make a difference in people's lives. However, there is no guarantee what extent that difference will be. The opportunity to truly make a difference in someone's life is one of the many rewards of nursing. A typical day of a nurse is filled with long hours of physical, mental, and emotional work. The role of a nurse varies from providing wellness education to healthy individuals to caring for sick or hurt individuals to caring for clients at the end of their lives. A nurse must constantly be at the top of their game intellectually, ready to meet the challenges of client care and make life and death decisions in a split second. This is not an easy job and can leave one exhausted and drained at the end of the day. One nurse stated, " It feels great to go home so tired but knowing you've made a true difference in someone else's life" (" Nursing's top", 2000, p. 42). Through long hours of hard work, nurses are able to go home at the end of the day knowing that their caring touch and compassionate service truly impacted the clients with whom they interacted.

Nursing is a hands-on profession, and the ability to relate to and connect with another human being on a personal, intimate level is rewarding. It is a sign of trust and respect from the clients being cared for. Clients are vulnerable and often in situations that are uncomfortable and awkward. In order to provide quality client care, nurses must interact and connect with their clients on a personal level and show they truly care for their well-being. According to Riley (2008), caring is essential for an effective nurse-client relationship and guides the way for developing a level of hope and trust between the nurse and client. Nurses show they care not only by tending to physical needs but by spending time with the client and taking time to understand their needs and the wishes and desires of the client and their family. For many nurses “this human connection” (“Nursing’s top”, 2000, p. 42) is the main reason they have chosen a career in nursing.

From Florence Nightingale to the battlefield nurses of World War II, the profession of nursing has stood the test of time and will continue to do so as long as there is pain and suffering in the world. This everlasting nature of the service nurses provide is rewarding to those who continue the legacy of providing compassionate care and nurturing through pain and suffering (“Nursing’s top”, 2000). There is no end in sight for the need of additional nurses. Zurmehly’s research (2008) projects a 29% increase in the demand for nurses between 2000 and 2020. As the population continues to grow and the number of senior adults continues to rise, so does the need for more nurses (Buerhaus, Staiger, & Auerbach, 2003). The profession of nursing has changed throughout the years to meet the needs of the culture and the

increasing demand for new nurses continues to carve out the legacy of the future of nursing.

In any rewarding career, there are also challenges to overcome. Nursing is no exception. The 21st century is facing a nursing crisis that is not new to the profession: a shortage of qualified nurses. The current nursing shortage has roots in the late 1990s (Buerhaus et al., 2003). Much research has been directed at identifying the cause of the nursing shortage and how to fix the problem. As the general population continues to age, so does the population of nurses. In 2002, it was estimated that nearly one-third of working nurses were over the age of 50 (Atencio, Cohen, & Gorenberg, 2003). This trend continues today and is a major contributor to the nursing shortage as more nurses are retiring and fewer nurses are entering the workforce. Factors such as job-related stress, physical demands, administrative responsibilities taking away from client care, high nurse-to-client ratios, insufficient monetary compensation, and lack of continuing education are making it harder to keep and retain qualified nurses (Albaugh, 2003).

In order to maintain the highest level of client care, addressing the shortage of qualified nursing personnel must be a priority. Retention of nurses is key in reducing the current shortage. With the rise in median age of nurses over recent years, hospitals are challenged to find ways to keep older, more experienced nurses and ways to attract and recruit new, younger nurses. Physical demands of the job are often to blame for nurses choosing to leave the profession. Facilities must make changes to decrease the physical demands placed on the nursing staff. Tampa General Hospital implemented a program in 2002 that created a lift team. These specially trained personnel

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were on-call specifically for the purpose of lifting and moving clients. This initiative reduced the physical demands on the nursing staff and allowed them more time to provide quality care to their clients (Runy, 2006).

Inadequate compensation also affects retention of nurses. Nurses want to be compensated appropriately for the work they perform and also to receive incentives to remain, including monetary recognition, retirement and benefit packages, and longevity compensation (Zurmehly, 2008). A hospital in Texas has attempted to retain veteran nurses by offering longevity bonuses bi-weekly beginning after 10 years of service (Runy, 2006). Nurses, particularly older nurses and working parents, often find themselves trying to juggle work and home responsibilities. Runy (2006) describes how flexible and creative scheduling allows nurses to work around their schedule and maintain some balance between career and personal activities, which leads to improved job satisfaction and retention.

Job satisfaction plays a role in the nursing shortage crisis. Dissatisfied nurses are leaving the client care setting or are choosing to leave the profession altogether. The solution to increasing job satisfaction, which is directly related to increased retention, can be accomplished by improving work conditions for nurses (Atencio et al., 2003). On-the-job stress leads to physical problems and decreased work performance. Clients today are older, sicker, and have multiple medical problems compared to in the past. These changes contribute significantly to work-related stress. Nurses often feel that they must constantly rush from one task to the next due to unrealistic workloads and high nurse-to-client ratios (Riley, 2008). Hospitals must address the concerns of working conditions and implement change to

develop places nurses want to work. The best place to start in addressing working conditions is with nurses. Nurses are on the front lines day in and day out and are the experts on working conditions and what must be done to improve them. Nurses want to work in places that enable them to provide quality care to clients and want to have a say in the processes that directly affect their job (Runy, 2006). Job satisfaction is increased as nurses receive training in multiple disciplines. With clients presenting with multiple comorbidities and diagnoses, it is essential that nurses have the knowledge and the skills to provide care to these clients. Continuing education should be available and all nurses should be encouraged to learn new skills and keep up-to-date with current trends and changes in technology and medical care. Finally, job satisfaction among nurses increases when they work in an environment where they feel part of a team, validated, and receive real-time feedback relating to the care they provide. Management involvement in the day-to-day work environment builds unity and motivates the nursing staff and is an essential component of job satisfaction and retention (Albaugh, 2003).

Although nursing is demanding, physically challenging, and requires a lot of hard work, nurses are rewarded by making a difference in the lives of their clients, developing trusting relationships with other people through connecting and caring, and being part of a professional legacy that has stood the test of time. The profession is in the midst of a crisis due to the shortage of qualified nurses. To overcome this crisis, medical facilities must address the issues of nurse retention and job satisfaction in order to provide quality

client care and continue the legacy of nursing that was set in motion so many years ago.