

What keeps nurses in nursing?

There is a shortage of registered nurses across the world, including in the UK. As demand for care increases, we need to find ways of recruiting more nurses and retaining those already in the workforce. But what makes some nurses decide to leave their jobs, or the profession altogether, and others stay? Understanding workplace factors that influence these decisions could help employers and policymakers to create the conditions needed to keep nurses in the profession.

In this Evidence Brief, we bring together the key findings from a scoping review of reports and research papers to summarise what is known about factors that influence nurse retention, and consider what more needs to be done to develop effective retention strategies.

What is the problem?

Worldwide there is an estimated shortfall of 6 million registered nurses.[1] Shortages have been attributed both to insufficient entrants to the register and problems retaining the existing workforce.[2]

The problem in the UK is likely to have been exacerbated by reduced access to international recruitment due to Brexit, and by mobility restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, responding to the pandemic has called for a rapid increase in the nursing workforce, and staff sickness absence and work pressures are at unprecedented levels. Work pressure is the main reason nurses give for leaving the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) register early.[3]

The goal for employers and policymakers is thus to make nursing jobs more attractive to nurses. Much research has been undertaken to investigate how workplace factors relate to nurses' decisions to stay in their jobs. What are the key findings? And what are the implications for policy and practice, to improve nurse retention?

Scoping review

We reviewed the academic and grey literature on nurse retention.[4] The overarching purpose of the review was to identify factors influencing nurses' decisions to stay in nursing and their jobs, in order to inform strategies to improve retention.

We identified published peer-reviewed research papers through a search using CINAHL, Medline, and Scopus databases. The review focussed on RNs working in any field. Qualitative and quantitative papers that reported on organisational factors influencing nurses' decision to stay were included. There was no restriction on the publication date (the earliest paper was published in 1991). Only papers with English abstracts were included.

Beyond academic literature, we scoped the 'grey literature' including blogs and opinion pieces, as well as reports from:

- global bodies (e.g. World Health Organisation, International Council of Nurses)
- policy think tanks (e.g. Health Foundation, Kings Fund),

- UK government and arms' length bodies (e.g. NHS Improvement, Health Education England, Nursing and Midwifery Council)
- organisations representing nurses and employers (e.g. Royal College of Nursing, NHS Employers).

Factors associated with nurse retention

We identified 24 relevant reports/policy documents and over 50 academic papers.[4] Research studies used a range of methods, including qualitative interviews, focus groups, and quantitative methods. We found a strong reliance on cross-sectional data (survey or routinely collected data); few studies used longitudinal data. Findings from UK-based research, whilst generally from smaller studies, aligned with those from other countries.

Most of the research focused on factors associated with retention. There was less evidence about how well retention strategies worked. The main findings in the academic literature were also reflected in the grey literature. The factors identified were categorised into eight broad themes, as depicted in Box 1.

Box 1: Nurse retention factors: key themes



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Job satisfaction is placed at the centre to show that many themes contribute to job satisfaction. Much of the research examines nurses leaving due to dissatisfaction with their jobs. Improving satisfaction is thus central to improving retention. These multiple factors overlap to indicate their interdependence and the absence of hierarchy. For instance, achieving care excellence depends upon adequate resources and both are connected to job satisfaction.

Overall, the review suggests that more nurses could be retained by:

- Having compassionate and caring leaders (see e.g. [5]) and fostering team cohesion (see e.g. [6]) to support nurses' well-being and professional development.
- Providing adequate staff and resources to allow nurses to deliver excellent care (see e.g. [7]).
- Supporting nurses at different career stages, recognising the need to adapt what is on offer according to the workforce profile.[8] For instance, mentorship and education packages may be most effective for new starters, whilst flexible pension provision and job redesign could help retain the older workforce.
- Paying and rewarding staff fairly.[9] This provides tangible signs of how the staff is valued, which impacts on retention.
- Investing in tailored education programmes and continuous professional development to enhance the skills and career prospects of nurses (see e.g. [10])
- Reducing stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction since they are risk factors of nurse turnover (see e.g. [8]).

Using evidence to inform practice

Factors influencing nurse retention are multidimensional; a "one-size-fits-all" intervention is unlikely to work well. Interventions should be tailored according to the workforce profile, to take account of differences between the types of nurse (specialty, stage of career, age, or generation) [12] and the context (e.g. geographical, labour market). Policy documents highlight that bundles of linked policies are likely to be more successful at retaining nurses than single interventions.

Accessing workforce data can help organisations and policymakers identify the most effective interventions. For example, the data can show them how many nurses are leaving, how this varies, and factors affecting retention.[11] In addition, workforce managers should use guiding frameworks stemming from the evidence base to help implement retention interventions.[11]

Knowledge gaps

Research has highlighted the range of factors affecting nurse retention but is less detailed about the relative importance of each factor for different groups of nurses. Much of the research and intelligence on retention is at a broad-brush level, without deconstructing the variation between sectors, specialties, and regions.

Lack of available data at the individual nurse level has limited our ability to undertake longitudinal analysis, which would offer a more complete view of staying and leaving behaviours among nurses in the UK.

There has been relatively little independent evaluation or research to measure the cost-effectiveness of specific retention interventions.

Limitations

This is a scoping review, not a systematic appraisal of research. The grey literature search was exploratory rather than comprehensive. Nonetheless, our review provides an overview of the factors related to nurse retention and pointers for future research, and policy and practice development.

Conclusions

- Factors influencing nurse retention are multidimensional and retention strategies should account for them.
- Workforce and longitudinal data analysis would be beneficial to further understand factors affecting nurse retention over time.
- Research is needed to estimate the cost-effectiveness of retention interventions.

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