Review Article

A 'New Pandemic' at Hand: Burnout of Nursing Staff

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Abstract

Background: The main risk factors for the occurrence of burnout in nurses include difficult working conditions prevailing in a hospital premise and complex relationships that may develop with other staff or patients. Caring for patients is a truly burdensome task that puts substantial physical and psychological pressure on nurses.

Objective: the aim of this critical review is to elaborate on the escalating phenomenon of nursing burnout and the factors associated with it across a variety of health care systems and to identify a common sequence that explains the phenomena in routine clinical terms and within contemporary practice.

Methods: For this review's needs, a critical search was undertaken in MEDLINE, CINAHL, and PsycINFO. Both quantitative primary empirical studies and qualitative which examined associations between burnout and work-related factors in the nursing workforce. Articles included were published either in English or in Greek, predominately within the last decade.

Results: There are four main elements that are highly associated with nursing burnout. These factors include Effects of burnout on nursing staff, Symptoms of burnout, Quality of patient care and Prevention of burnout. These can be found in table 1 together with their sub-categories. These will be further elaborated upon and critically appraised in the next section, i.e. discussion.

Discussion: Nursing burnout has a direct effect on the care provided for patients and studies report that high emotional exhaustion, high depersonalization and low personal goals result in poor quality of care provided to patients. Achieving personal goals is related to better quality of care and emotional exhaustion results in a low quality of care provided by the nursing staff.

Conclusions: As the nursing workforce represents the largest section within health care workers and given their valuable input as recently proven during the COVID-19 pandemic, and since the nurse workforce is predominantly female and married, their domestic responsibilities on top of a highly demanding shift work can only increase their overall burden and risk of burnout.

Key words: burnout, nursing force, risk factors

Introduction

Workplace risk factors, both internal and external increase an individual's chance of developing an adverse condition or a severe psychopathological state. Factors contribute to workplace problems and burnout have been the subject of extensive studies around the world (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Burnout is usually found in professional environments of all professional groups, such as civil servants, nurses, educators and many others who may experience a range of burnout symptoms from moderate to severe. Although burnout occurs in all professional groups, it is most noticeable among professionals whose work includes ongoing demands but also intense interaction with people who have physical and emotional needs such as found within the nursing profession (Valente et al., 2011).

The main risk factors for the occurrence of burnout in nurses include difficult working conditions prevailing in a hospital premise and complex relationships that may develop with other staff or patients. Caring for patients is a truly burdensome task that puts substantial physical and psychological pressure on nurses (Serin and Balkan, 2014). Patients usually have high demands and expectations of nurses, while nurses may not have the ability or the means, due to working conditions, to fulfill all patients' expectations. The combination of these factors often put nurses at high risk for physical and mental conditions, including burnout (Wu et al., 2021).

Although most scholars suggest that that burnout develops gradually over time, and can be considered as an escalating process, it is also relevant to consider gender differences in the development of burnout as the onset of this syndrome might be different for men and women, and hence, the early burnout signals may differ for men and women. Thus, globally, there is a vivid current debate whether in general working women can be expected to be more at risk for burnout than men. As generally perceived, women have a higher risk of this, due to multiple life tasks, i.e. professional, domestic and mothering roles, thus, women report a higher prevalence of work-related fatigue than men (Mudallal et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, there is still a considerable lack of clarity about the causal sequence of the three key-burnout dimensions i.e. emotional

exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. A good understanding of the etiology and development of burnout though, could facilitate the early recognition and subsequent treatment of the condition (Shah et al., 2021; Al-Ma'aitah et al., 1999).

Aim: the aim of this critical review is to elaborate on the escalating phenomenon of nursing burnout and the factors associated with it across a variety of health care systems and to identify a common sequence that explains the phenomena in routine clinical terms and within contemporary practice.

Methods

For this review's needs, a critical search was undertaken in MEDLINE, CINAHL, and PsycINFO. Both quantitative primary empirical studies and qualitative which examined associations between burnout and work-related factors in the nursing workforce. Articles included were published either in English or in Greek, predominately within the last decade. Key words used were: burnout, nursing force, risk factors in combinations 'of' and 'or'.

Findings

There are four main elements that are highly associated with nursing burnout. These factors include *Effects of burnout on nursing staff, Symptoms of burnout, Quality of patient care and Prevention of burnout.* These can be found in table 1 together with their sub-categories. These will be further elaborated upon and critically appraised in the next section, i.e. discussion.

Table 1: factors that predispose nurses to burnout

Effects of burnout on nursing staff	Symptoms of burnout	Quality of care	f patient	Prevention burnout	of
Staff Performance	Physical symptoms			Burnout Financial Cost	and
	Psychological symptoms				
	Behavioral symptoms				

Discussion

Effects of burnout on nursing staff

The three components of burnout are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced professional achievements (Maslach et al., 2001). The emergence of either one or two or all three of these elements in nurses leads to a decrease in their performance and productivity, this has a significant effect on the quality of life of workers and care of patients, with what this ultimately implies for the safety of patients (Keeley, 2018).

Staff Performance

Burnout is usually seen as a negative response of a person exposed to prolonged work stress, which in turn can affect job satisfaction and often productivity and performance (Vanyperen et al., 1992). Performance of staff is influenced by poor work satisfaction, recognized as a factor contributing to high levels of burnout among nurses (Halbesleben, 2006). Reduced performance and low satisfaction from work due to burnout, results in increased intention of staff to leave the profession (Aiken et al., 2002).

Poor health status and lack of sleep were found in studies to affect nursing performance and productivity. According to Rudman and Gustavsson (2011), nurses who had already had health problems before entering the profession were more likely to experience intense burnout when they started working in shiftwork. Moreover, Khamisa et al. (2016) found that emotional exhaustion is a predictive factor of general health.

As regards to sleep quality, it was found to be both an important predictor of burnout and a result of burnout per se (Lupo et al., 2021). Laschinger et al. (2015) suggest that health-related burnout can result in mental health problems in nurses. Symptoms of depression are a predictive factor of both depersonalization and emotional exhaustion, which implies that depression is strongly associated with burnout levels (Johnson et al., 2018).

Also, low job satisfaction has been associated in many studies with burnout with some scholars

regarding it as a common early predictive factor (Akman et al., 2016, Liu and Aungsuroch, 2018). Thus, the higher the level of satisfaction the lower the levels of burnout. Laschinger et al., (2016) claim that emotional exhaustion significantly affects the intentions employees, exacerbating further dissatisfaction at work. According to studies by Boamah et al. (2017) and Laschinger (2016), job discontent was associated with emotional exhaustion and cynicism; also, several studies reported a correlation of emotional exhaustion alone with low job satisfaction (Khamisa et al., 2016, Laschinger et al., 2001, Dutra et al., 2019).

In cases where high levels of emotional exhaustion have been recorded in nursing, they were more likely to be absent from work due to reported illness. Generally emotional exhaustion is related to increased absence of nurses from work according to Friganović et al., (2019) and more generally to absence due to psychological problems, according to Chen and Meier (2021).

With regard to abandoning the profession, Estryn-Behar et al. (2008) found that the higher the level of burnout, the greater the intention to leave the job, while Laeeque et al. (2019) in their study, reported that burnout is related to intention to retire early. Two studies found a correlation of emotional exhaustion with intention to abandon work (Dutra et al. 2019, Marques-Pinto et al. 2018). Similarly, Leiter (2021) found that cynicism is directly related to the intention of workers to leave their jobs. While in the Boamah and Laschinger survey (2016), emotional exhaustion and cynicism was found to be correlated with the intention of abandoning the profession.

Symptoms of burnout

Burnout is a syndrome created by stressful situations at work, with several implications for the well-being and health of workers. The effects of burnout affect not only the physical condition of the person, but also his behavior at work and his social life (Kim et al., 2021). Symptoms of burnout are grouped in psychological, behavioral and physical.

Common physical symptoms of burnout include: headaches, gastrointestinal respiratory problems, elevated cholesterol levels, weight and blood pressure changes (Kitaoka-Higashiguchi et al., (2009), type II diabetes (Melamed et al, 2006), coronary artery disease occurrence (Toker et al., 2012), sexual dysfunction and musculoskeletal pain (Armon et al., 2014).

Psychological symptoms include: depression (Schonfeld and Bianchi, 2016), insomnia (Bridgeman et al., 2018), apathy, stress, boredom, feeling of futility, negative mood, irritability, decreased confidence. suspiciousness and irritation (Bridgeman, et al., 2018).

Behavioral symptoms include: reduced work performance, drug consumption, lack of enthusiasm for work, increased family conflict, job mania, increased complaints about work, inability to concentrate (Bridgeman et al., 2018), frequent injuries (Ahola et al., 2013) and increased levels of absence (Borritz et al., 2010).

Quality of patient care

Nursing burnout has a direct effect on the care provided for patients. Nantsupawat et al. (2016) report that high emotional exhaustion, high depersonalization and low personal goals result in poor quality of care provided to patients. Van Bogaert et al., (2014) report that achieving personal goals is related to better quality of care. Laschinger et al., (2009) and Van Bogaert et al. (2009) report that emotional exhaustion resulted in a low quality of care provided by the nursing staff.

Teng et al. (2009) found that emotional exhaustion, cynicism and depersonalization components of burnout - contribute negatively to patient safety levels and the productivity of nursing staff. The study concludes that emotional stability leads to better and more correct stress management and improved problem solving. Van Bogaert et al. (2014) report that the emotional exhaustion of nurses is linked to verbal assaults on both patients and members of their families.

Nantsupawat et al. (2016) reported that emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced professional achievements predicted errors in the administration of medicines by nurses. Montgomery et al. (2021) also added that nurses' burnout is an important factor in predicting medication errors.

Van Bogaert et al. (2014), associated emotional exhaustion with rising hospital infections as high levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization of nurses are important warnings for developing infections in patients (Nantsupawat et al., 2016). Cimoitti et al. (2012) included 7076 nurses in 161 U.S. hospitals. Their study showed that burnout was associated with an increase in nosocomial infections. The increase in infections was directly related to burnout of the nurses, the latter resulting from the high workload. The same authors state in their study that when burnout was not severe and there was less strain, a significantly lower number of infections were recorded.

In two studies, patient falls were correlated with the nurses' sense of depersonalization (Nantsupawat et al., 2016, Van Bogaert et al., 2014) whereby in both cases, it was found to be an important predictor. Halbesleben et al. (2008), in a study involving ICU nurses and surgeons found that due to the burnout of nurses, the safety of the patients was significantly compromised. The investigation showed that burnout led to a failure to report errors or omissions.

Nursing-patient ratio and patient mortality, nursing burnout and work dissatisfaction was examined in a 2002 study in the United States (Aiken et al, 2002). Where sub-staffing of hospital units was recorded, high rates of emotional exhaustion were also recorded. It also emerged that there was a risk of high mortality among patients, which was a consequence of the poor staff-patient ratios.

Prevention of burnout

According to Gascon et al. (2013), in order to prevent burnout among healthcare workers, prevention plays a very important role. Preventive actions concern both changes in the working environment and tactics that enhance the ability of workers to cope with stressful situations. Preventive tactics are classified as:

- Primary preventive measures (prevention of burnout),
- Secondary measures (early burnout recognition and intervention) and
- measures Tertiary (response to consequences, rehabilitation and rectification).

First, primary prevention measures are about changes in the working environment, both organizational and administrative. Secondary measures to prevent burnout are aimed at the education and training of workers. Tertiary measures are aimed at significantly reducing burnout in healthcare workers per se (Gascon et al. 2013).

Bakhuys et al. (2020) report that the identification and treatment of a workplace problem significantly contributes to the reduction of burnout and decreased work stress. The improvement of the ability of workers to perceive and cope with stress can be achieved through appropriate training. At the same time, procedures such as better and of redistribution workload, breaks, prioritization of tasks, evaluation of physical risks in workplaces can help to reduce, if not eliminate, work stress and thus reduce burnout.

Gascon et al. (2013) and Burton et al., (2020) in their studies say that frequent meetings with supervisors to solve problems and issues at the workplace and participation in social events, can reduce alienation in the work environment. At the same time, they say that flexible working hours, worker support (child care, transport) can increase the positive interaction between work/home/family.

Sullivan et al. (2022) states that poor emotional support of employees implies increased periods of absence from work due to illness and lower productivity. Therefore, an opposite situation, i.e. high emotional support, would bring the opposite effect.

Ruotsalainen et al. (2008)state organizational interventions in health care can reduce occupational stress in workers. Interventions aimed at preventing burnout syndrome through improving the management of interpersonal relationships in mental health workers have shown positive results and a decrease in the level of their depersonalization (Scarnera et al., 2009).

Burnout and Financial Cost

The main causes of high attrition and early retirement are mental health problems and other stress related disorders. At the same time, mental health-related problems are associated with lengthy absence from work, poor health and low occupational production capacity. According to Tennant (2001) high risk groups of workers exhibiting depression and burnout contribute significantly to reduced efficiency and productivity, while transmitting negativity to other members of the group.

The financial cost of burnout can be direct or indirect. The formal includes increased job vacancies, reduced productivity, and the additional costs of hiring new workers, which may require considerable time to be full members of the working team and produce accordingly. Indirect costs relate to the risk of 'infecting' other workers, thus, the disruption caused to the workforce as a whole.

According to WHO (2006) low quality of workers health, as well as a reduction in the workers ability to work, can bring about losses of between 10% and 20% of the GDP of a national economy.

Although there are no exact correlations between economic losses and the phenomenon of burnout, the relationship between burnout and absenteeism has been identified in some surveys. Williams and Normand (2003) in their study state that the Canadian Policy Research Network estimates that absence from work due to stress costs about \$3.5 billion per year. McConnell (2010) in Australia states that 1.5 million workers suffer from some kind of depressive disorder, due to high levels of stress at work, with the cost of up to \$8,000 per person per year. In countries that are between developing and developed states, such as Russia, changes in 'traditional risks' (biological and physical) have caused a shift in costs due to burnout risk (Iushkova et al., 2008).

Conclusions: Professional burnout is a threat not only to the nursing profession but also a major risk to the health of the citizens in many Therefore, estimating nursing countries. burnout and associated factors is vital for addressing the causes of burnout and improvising practical and efficient ways of tackling it. Low staffing ratios, lack of communication between clinicians, poor leadership and lack of organizational infrastructure. i.e. inadequate working environments for nurses, are associated with high levels burnout.

As the nursing workforce represents the largest section within health care workers and given their valuable input as recently proven during the COVID-19 pandemic, and since the nurse workforce is predominantly female and married, their domestic responsibilities on top of a highly demanding shift work can only increase their overall burden and risk of burnout.

Furthermore, given that the nurses experience significant stress, anxiety, and physical effects related to their work, these factors have been amplified during the current pandemic, placing the nurse workforce at a significant risk of increased strain, resulting in increased attrition and ultimately at severe nursing shortages globally.

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