EXPERIENCING STAFF TURNOVER: PERCEPTIONS OF NURSING TECHNICIANS
IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

ABSTRACT

Objective: Identify perceptions of nursing technicians who remain in a service in face of staff turnover. Method: Qualitative research conducted with 17 workers pursuing their tasks in a university hospital. Data were analyzed through Thematic Content Analysis, identifying two categories: "Experiencing the weaknesses of staff turnover" and "A look at the potentials of staff turnover." The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Paraná State University of Londrina (UEL), under the Certificate of Submission for Ethical Review (CAEE) 0065.0.268.268-11. Results: when a colleague leaves her/his job, it raises feelings of loss and sadness, which affect service quality. However, leaving is positively perceived when this is a colleague’s will and it is regarded as an opportunity to make new friends and learn from the new employee. Conclusion: the experiences provided some reflection on the use of strategies to mitigate suffering and increase satisfaction among workers who remain in a service in face of staff turnover in health institutions. Descriptors: Job Satisfaction; Human Resources Administration In Hospitals; Interpersonal Relationships.

RESUMO

Objetivo: identificar percepções de técnicos de enfermagem que permanecem no serviço diante da rotatividade de pessoal. Método: pesquisa qualitativa realizada com 17 trabalhadores que atuam em hospital universitário. Os dados foram analisados por meio da Análise de Conteúdo Temático, identificando duas categorias: “Vivenciando as fragilidades da rotatividade de pessoal” e “Um olhar para as potencialidades da rotatividade de pessoal”. O projeto obteve aprovação do Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa da Universidade Estadual de Londrina (UEL), sob o Certificado de Apresentação para Apreciação Ética (CAEE) 0065.0.268.268-11. Resultados: a saída de um colega suscita sentimentos de perda e tristeza, afetando a qualidade do serviço. Todavia, a saída é percebida positivamente quando essa é a vontade do colega e é vista como uma oportunidade de criar novos laços de amizade e aprender com o novo funcionário. Conclusão: as vivências possibilitaram reflexão sobre como utilizar estratégias para atenuar o sofrimento e aumentar a satisfação dos trabalhadores que permanecem no serviço diante da rotatividade de profissionais nas instituições de saúde. Descriptores: Satisfação no Trabalho; Administração de Recursos Humanos em Hospitais; Relações Interpessoais.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: identificar percepciones de técnicos de enfermería que permanecen en servicio delante de la rotación de personal. Método: investigación cualitativa realizada con 17 trabajadores que actúan en un hospital universitario. Los datos fueron analizados a través del Análisis de Contenido Temático, identificando dos categorías: “Experimentando las debilidades de la rotación de personal” y “Una mirada a las potencialidades de la rotación de personal”. El proyecto fue aprobado por el Comité de Ética en Investigación de la Universidad Provincial de Londrina (UEL), bajo el Certificado de Sumisión a Evaluación Ética (CAEE) 0065.0.268.268-11. Resultados: la salida de un colega suscita sentimientos de pérdida y tristeza, lo que afecta la calidad del servicio. Sin embargo, la salida se percibe positivamente cuando esta es la voluntad del colega y se considera como una oportunidad para crear nuevas amistades y aprender del nuevo empleado. Conclusión: las experiencias proporcionaron reflexión acerca del uso de estrategias para mitigar el sufrimiento y mejorar la satisfacción de los trabajadores que permanecen en servicio delante de la rotación de profesionales en las instituciones de salud. Descriptores: Satisfacción En El Trabajo; Administración de Recursos Humanos en Hospitales; Relaciones Interpersonales.
INTRODUCTION

Turnover in the workforce context has been a continuing phenomenon in health institutions. This process was intensified after 1970, as a result of changes in the Brazilian economic view, which increased the number of private institutions and consequently expanded the amount of jobs.³

Turnover is conceptually defined as the input and output personnel movement in the institution, either voluntary or not.² It is measured by the number of workers remaining in the jobs in a section, company, industry, or area, within a given period.³

Among the factors contributing to turnover, there is human resources supply and demand in the market, the country’s economic policy, wages offered by the institutions, possibility of career advancement, interpersonal relationships, working conditions, greater participation in decision-making, and organizational culture.³ ⁵

The conditions cited above are associated with individual search for other workplaces driven by the expectation of greater satisfaction in her/his working activities. Thus, a factor that inversely interferes with staff turnover is job satisfaction.⁴ ⁶ ⁷

As for the turnover interfaces, commitment to nursing care quality stands out, because when a health professional leaves her/his job, in addition to costs related to dismissal and hiring a new employee, there is an adaptation and training period for the newly hired worker, which may directly affect the service provided.⁶

In a comparative study of private, philanthropic, and public hospitals, change in the workforce context was more relevant in non-public institutions, since they did not require public tenders to hire workers and exoneration procedures to fire them. Nevertheless, turnover is also found in public hospitals and it implies significant consequences to worker’s health and patient care.⁴

This study was triggered by the authors’ experience regarding a major change in the provision of human resources within in-patient services of a public university hospital, on the occasion of a period when nursing professionals left their jobs while new civil servants were hired. This situation led the authors to think through the fact and its repercussions on staff, thus this question emerged: “Which are the perceptions of nursing technicians who remain in a service in face of staff turnover?”

This article may be claimed as relevant due to the fact that its theme is related to nursing professionals, because they are the agents who directly contribute to care quality, hence their experiences and perceptions must be evaluated and considered. Also, by performing a literature search on staff turnover in nursing care, within the period from 2001 to 2013, on the Virtual Health Library (VHL), it was found that among the 7 scientific articles, 1 master’s dissertation, 2 course-conclusion papers, and 1 monograph, with full text available in Portuguese, there were no studies analyzing the perception of workers through a qualitative methodology.

This study provide a basis to design new strategies concerning the management of human resources in health, aiming at worker’s satisfaction and consequently care quality in a public hospital.

Given the above, this article aims to identify the perceptions of nursing technicians who remain in a service in face of staff turnover.

METHOD

This study has a descriptive and exploratory nature, with a qualitative approach, and it was conducted within adult in-patient services of a public university hospital located in northern Paraná, Brazil. The institution has 316 beds and, in 2010, it provided care to 48,648 people from the municipality and the metropolitan area. Out of these patients, 11,177 users were hospitalized in the services under analysis.⁸

Adult in-patient services were selected for this research because they are the sectors with higher staff turnover in the institution, hence the experience of nursing technicians in face of this event is more prevalent. These services are divided into male and female medical-surgical centers and communicable diseases center, which have 108 nursing technicians to provide patients with care.

Individual interviews were conducted with 17 nursing technicians from these services, in a private room, at the civil servant’s workplace. Participants were randomly chosen, covering the three work shifts (morning, afternoon, and night) and the three centers, according to these criteria: having an employment relationship with the institution and working in the service for at least 36 months. Data collection took place from August to October 2011.

To unveil respondents’ feelings, a guiding question was used to: “Which are your perceptions regarding nursing staff turnover in...
the service where you work?” In appropriate situations, ancillary questions were applied.

Before starting data collection, it was decided to carry out a pilot test in a hospital service having similar characteristics to the study field. This procedure contributed to improve the guiding and ancillary questions in relation to the study objective.

Data analysis was grounded in Bardin. After collection, testimonies were fully transcribed, in order to ensure data reliability. Subsequently, the speeches were carefully and individually read, and pertinent excerpts were highlighted (meaning units). Then, successive readings of these sense units were performed, and they were grouped according to similarity, something which enabled us to identify the thematic categories of this study.

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Paraná State University of Londrina (UEL), under the Certificate of Submission for Ethical Review (CAEE) 0065.0.268.268-11.

In order to preserve respondents’ identity and distinguish them from each other, they were identified by the letter “T” followed by an Arabic numeral, according to the order of interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through the analysis of respondents’ discourses, similarities and specificities were noticed in the expression of their perceptions of the study object. Thus, two categories were identified in this study: “Experiencing the weaknesses of staff turnover” and “A look at the potentials of staff turnover.”

Experiencing the weaknesses of staff turnover

When a colleague leaves her/his job in the service, it may trigger feelings of sadness and loss in the civil servant who remains in it, as shown in the following speeches:

- When an employee is good, we even feel sorry, indeed, we feel as if we lost a family member. (T5)
- I did not like it, I was sad. It was such a sudden leave that some people had no time to say goodbye. (T4)

According to respondents’ experiences, staff turnover triggers a significant feeling of loss, which may be compared to losing a family member. This loss is felt when a nursing technician’s work is appreciated by her/his colleagues, and this appreciation consists of economic factors derived from work technique that involves supervisor and clients’ judgment and aesthetic factors assigned to work and recognized by peers, and the latter are regarded as the most important, since the peer analyzes the process and outcome of an activity she/he also carries out.

In the work process of nursing, it is essential that professionals have technical knowledge to fulfill the activities proposed by the institution, as well as to actively engage in interpersonal relationships with the team in various situations, because both of these two skills significantly interfere with providing care.

Furthermore, when a colleague suddenly leaves her/his job, as mentioned by the respondent T4, it may generate work disruption and a feeling of powerlessness due to the lack of opportunity to say goodbye, something which involves feelings of sadness and longing.

Emotional bonds are established in the workplace over time and they bring up feelings of friendship, solidarity, and support among those involved in the work process. Nevertheless, the working organizations and human beings are always on the run. When a worker leaves, the professionals who remain in the service do experience feelings of anxiety, something which triggers at the same time a reconstruction of their identity at the workplace, requiring new relationships to be established.

The hospital where this study was conducted underwent a major staff turnover period, due to the standards and laws governing it; this fact also made the process to replace civil servants slower. In this context of shortage of human resources and high demand for care, respondents noticed that lack of personnel directly affected service quality:

- Look, it’s stressful, sometimes we have to work for two and you see that the service could be better due to lack of manpower… it’s hard… A feeling of powerlessness. (T14)
- When someone leaves and no one comes, we have a hard time, because there is a burden of work. (T8)
- It generates a huge lack of staff, so everyone ends up overload. (T13)

This feeling of powerlessness in face of turnover reported by the worker may be understood as a concern with service quality and users and workers’ safety. This scenario makes a worker suffer, and this enables the individual to seek strategies to address and change the situation she/he lives in, leading her/him to tackle the burden of work and suffering.
Experiencing staff turnover: perceptions of nursing...

I see a new employee, “oh my God,” I think both considering the patient and my work. (T9)

[... ] things are not fully well done, they are done halfway. Turnover is bad, I do not like it. When a new employee comes and I’m gonna exchange work shifts, I feel afraid, because I know it’ll be up to me. (T6)

Fear of working with some newcomer to the service may be noticed in the speeches, either due to absence of the person who left or because the technical and interpersonal skills of this new worker are not known.

Continuing education professionals play the role of integrating this new professional to her/his job, providing her/him with training to fulfill the main routines and procedures in the institution, something which can prevent or mitigate any adverse experiences mentioned by respondents.

Respondents expressed fear of inappropriate care and they were worried about burden of work due to the new employee’s inexperience.

This fear of job execution may lead to bodily degradation due to accumulation of activities as a consequence of the new employee’s inexperience and the very working conditions, and this may generate, in the short term, physical and psychic problems. 17

Given the above, we observe that respondents’ perceptions had their peculiarities, but there was a predominance of the feeling of grief, either due to losing a colleague, burden of work, or concern about the future. Conformity in face of turnover showed up as a defense mechanism to prevent worker’s suffering.

♦ A look at the potentials of staff turnover

Through data analysis, it was possible to grasp that the negative perception of turnover was not unanimous among nursing technicians. Respondents also reported positive factors regarding a colleague’s arrival or departure, exemplified below:

Because sometimes one wants to leave and she/he is unhappy about the service, so she/he does not work well and sometimes she/he is willing to work elsewhere and feels happy, so it makes me happy. (T2)

When a person gets a promotion or moves to a better place, oh yes, it is positive. (T4)

It’s interesting when this reflects one’s will, I think it’s interesting due to her/his very will. (T9)

Turnover is seen as beneficial when it is requested by the colleague her/himself and it causes a feeling of happiness and satisfaction.
among respondents because of the other’s conquest and achievement.

Whereas the study site is a public institution, transfers to other sectors are time consuming, so when it comes into practice, change of service is seen as the recognition for a worker’s contribution to the organization. Such recognition is a source of pleasure for the beneficiary and her/his colleagues, encouraging everyone to fulfill their activities.

When a new colleague arrives, there is often simultaneous departure of another civil servant. The nursing team working in the service often experiences this in a positive way, because the professionals believe new friendships will be made.

When a lot of new people arrive I kind of like it, so I greet and start interacting… (T5)

When there is a staffing increase, the most experienced civil servant has the opportunity to welcome the newly hired colleague, creating an affective bond at the workplace and turning her/his suffering into pleasure through this new relationship. This getting closer results in an accelerated integration of the new employee and contributes, through interpersonal relationship, to adapt new situations and job satisfaction.18

Respondents also highlighted that the arrival of a new colleague enables personal and professional growth.

We learn to get along with other people, learn to have greater respect for the others and the others respect us. (T3)

[…] I think it’s interesting because I think that since you change people in the service, you change your attitudes, learn something new, you have a chance to do different things. (T17)

According to these testimonies, an attitude of openness in relation to staffing changes at the workplace is noticed. Such openness turns suffering into pleasure through the possibility of creating new bonds and learning from them. Along with this, there is a respect that surely brings benefits to the team’s quantitative and qualitative performance.

Change in the organization may be seen as pleasure and/or suffering, this will depend on the service dynamics and a worker’s life history.19 In this context, we notice that these workers are the first to embrace change, i.e. they accept it and see it as a way to improve service quality.

Doubts and lack of confidence are perceived in a greater proportion among the newly hired employees due to their adaptation to routines of the service they are getting into. According to the testimony, this adaptation phase is perceived by a colleague, who ends up having a zealous attitude towards the new employee:

You have to double caution, you have to be more careful, and you have to be attentive, because you feel accountable. (T15)

Doubling caution is a concern about the performance of a new team member, in order to ensure a satisfactory nursing care. Such accountability shows commitment to client service and, although it is not her/his role monitoring the work of a colleague, the respondent cares about her/his performance, since everybody is a team member and, as a consequence, every professional is accountable for the care provided.

Teamwork within the health field is crucial for proper care and it promotes service quality and effectiveness, through collective collaboration. A team is able to improve the performance of individuals when people having different skills and experiences come together to work together, just as observed in the nursing work process.20

The attitude of caring about the performance of a newly admitted employee may contribute to overcome this professional’s insertion phase, because it enables the interaction between workers and consequently promotes greater acceptance of each other.20 In this context there emerges a sense of trust, which is established through an affective, overt, relationship that requires a time of getting along and exchanging experiences.16

Corroborating the testimonies, the arrival of a coworker gives rise to new thoughts and innovative situations that lead a worker to think of strategies not previously thought of. This allows learning from each other, which is crucial so that the individual expands her/his possibilities of coping with difficulties and dilemmas observed in daily work.

Just as the presence of a new worker in the service provides opportunity to obtain new knowledge, she/he may be perceived by the group as a source of encouragement and renewal in the work process:

It’s good, because a new broom sweeps well. (T7)

I think it’s good [when a new worker arrives], because they came with another view, with renewed energy. (T12)

According to the testimonies, the arrival of a new employee is regarded as positive, because these people contribute to the patient care process and they bring a different view of the service and work.

Work psychodynamics suggests that a subject’s contribution to the organization of positive attachments to patients is a function of the quality of interpersonal relationships among professionals.16

18 Respondents also highlighted that the arrival of a new colleague enables personal and professional growth.
19 In this context, we notice that these workers are the first to embrace change, i.e. they accept it and see it as a way to improve service quality.
20 Double caution is a concern about the performance of a new team member, in order to ensure a satisfactory nursing care.
builds meaning at the workplace and a good relationship between professionals is based on mutual help, indicating team unity, work quality, and, as a consequence, pleasure.21

According to respondent T7, new employees seek to build meaning at the workplace and strengthen their personal identity, and they are appreciated by their (older) peers. This construction, in practical terms, is reflected on a newly hired employee’s greater willingness to fulfill activities. Appreciate the work done by beginners ends up encouraging senior technicians, and it may drive people to achieve their goals and feel pleased with the work done.

It is worth highlighting that a neophyte who has such “renewed energy” feels her/his process of getting into the group is easy, because she/he is appreciated due to her/his contribution to work and interpersonal relationships. Thus, this longing to work gives rise to a positive perception of the individual within the team, besides making it easier to learn routines.

The contribution of a new civil servant to teamwork makes relationships and care easier, it enables exchange of experiences, improves communication, and enhances skills, thus it increases job satisfaction.22

It is noticeable that respondents expressed satisfaction in face of turnover, above all when this staffing change in the service is a colleague’s will, something which brings up a feeling of happiness for each other and provides the professionals who remain in the service with new learning. It was identified that this new employee still encourages the current group to grow and pursue its work with increased commitment and motivation.

CONCLUSION

The results of this paper suggest that turnover directly affects the civil servant who remains in the service, and often this change causes distress to her/him, but it may also promote personal and professional growth. Noticing and unveiling such a miscegenation of perceptions of turnover from workers’ perspective was of paramount importance, because it enabled us to think through the need for strategies that can mitigate or minimize suffering and increase pleasure in face of the arrival and departure of nursing professionals in health care services.

It is not possible to extinguish or prevent staff turnover, however we can manage the consequences this entails and provide the civil servant who remained in the service with a better support, helping her/him to overcome the loss and enabling conditions to adapt to new co-workers.

Turnover brings with it consequences for the worker and the work process. Often, it is not up to the institution, above all in public services, firing and hiring civil servants, and the potentially slow process involved in it also is not an institution’s fault. However, care should be guaranteed, because each client has the right to safe and good quality care.

Expectations will always be expressed about a worker who leaves and a new employee who comes to the service, but being willing to work along with various views contributes to the growth of a nursing team. Such a growth must be shared by everyone involved in the process at the various levels within the institution, as it enables commitment to actions and improved service quality, providing as a final product greater personal satisfaction and better performance in nursing care.

REFERENCES


