



## Positive Practice Environments

# Fact Sheet

We are immersed in a global health workforce crisis – one marked by critical imbalances. Many countries are faced with the challenge of underemployed and unemployed nurses side by side with dramatic shortages. The reasons for the crisis are varied and complex, but key among them are unhealthy work environments and the poor organisational climate that characterise many workplaces. The ongoing underinvestment in the health sector, coupled with poor employment conditions and policies (such as exposure to occupational hazards, discrimination and physical and psychological violence; insufficient remuneration; unfavourable work-life balances; unreasonable work loads, limited career development opportunities, etc.) have resulted in a deterioration of working conditions in many countries. There is clear evidence globally that this has a serious negative impact on the recruitment and retention of health professionals, the productivity and performance of health facilities, and ultimately on patient outcomes.

### **P**ositive Practice Environments Defined

Positive Practice Environments are settings that support excellence and decent work. In particular, they strive to ensure the health, safety and personal well-being of staff, support quality patient care and improve the motivation, productivity and performance of individuals and organisations.<sup>1</sup>

### **E**lements of Positive Practice Environments

Positive practice environments are characterised by:

- Occupational health, safety and wellness policies that address workplace hazards, discrimination, physical and psychological violence and issues pertaining to personal security
- Fair and manageable workloads and job demands/stress
- Organisational climate reflective of effective management and leadership practices, good peer support, worker participation in decision-making, shared values
- Healthy work-life balance
- Equal opportunity and treatment
- Opportunities for professional development and career advancement
- Professional identity, autonomy and control over practice
- Job security
- Decent pay and benefit

- Safe staffing levels
- Support and supervision
- Open communication and transparency
- Recognition programmes
- Access to adequate equipment, supplies and support staff <sup>2</sup>

## **B**enefits of Positive Practice Environments

The beneficial effects of positive practice environments on health service delivery, health worker performance, patient outcomes and innovation are well documented.

- Positive changes in the work environment result in a higher employee retention rate, which leads to better teamwork, increased continuity of patient care, and ultimately improvements in patient outcomes.
- PPEs demonstrate a commitment to safety in the workplace, leading to an overall job satisfaction.
- When nurses are satisfied with their jobs, rates of absenteeism and turnover decrease, staff morale and productivity increase, and work performance as a whole improves.<sup>3</sup>
- Fostering a sense of communication and leadership within the work environment produces a level of confidence that nurses feel toward their workplace that also aids in the overall satisfaction of employees.<sup>4</sup>
- Maintaining a level of autonomy over their work allows nurses to feel that they are respected and valued members in their places of employment.
- Research demonstrates that nurses are attracted to and remain at their place of employment when opportunities exist that allow them to advance professionally, to gain autonomy and participate in decision-making, while being fairly compensated.<sup>5</sup>
- Effective nursing teamwork is essential to the work in health care organisations.<sup>6</sup> It improves the quality of nursing work life as well as patient care.<sup>7</sup>
- A significant number of research studies have linked higher numbers and a richer mix of qualified nurses to reductions in patient mortality, rates of respiratory, wound and urinary tract infections, number of patient falls, incidence of pressure sores and medication errors.<sup>8</sup>

## **C**ost of Unhealthy and Unsafe Workplaces

Unhealthy environments affect nurses' physical and psychological health through the stress of heavy workloads, long hours, low professional status, difficult relations in the workplace, problems carrying out professional roles, and a variety of workplace hazards. The costs of these unhealthy and unsafe workplaces for nurses have been well documented:

- Evidence indicates that long periods of job strain affect personal relationships and increase sick time, conflict, job dissatisfaction, turnover, and inefficiency.
- A disconnect between the work demanded of nurses and what they can reasonably provide threatens their health and puts patients at risk.
- Evidence indicates that one third of newly qualified nurses in the United Kingdom do not register; negative experiences in the workplace or clinical placements seem to turn these new graduates away from the profession.<sup>9</sup>
- A study of nurses in the United States, Canada, England, Scotland and Germany

showed that 41% of hospital nurses were dissatisfied with their jobs and 22% planned to leave them in less than one year; findings confirmed the relationship between workplace stress and nurses' morale, job satisfaction, commitment to the organisation and intention to quit.

- Research has found that in a given unit the optimal workload for a nurse is four patients. Increasing the workload to six resulted in patients being 14% more likely to die within 30 days of admission. A workload of eight patients versus four was associated with a 31% increase in mortality.<sup>10</sup>
- Overworked nurses may display slower reaction times, less alertness to changes in patients' conditions, and medication errors, which translate into adverse risks to patients.<sup>11</sup>
- High turnover, a symptom of a poor work environment is likely to lead to higher provider costs, such as in recruitment and training of new staff and increased overtime and use of temporary agency staff to fill gaps. Turnover costs also include the initial reduction in the efficiency of new staff and decreased staff morale and group productivity.<sup>12</sup>

## **M**aking Positive Practice Environments a Reality

Developing, promoting and maintaining positive practice environments is multifaceted, occurs on many levels of an organisation and involves a range of players (e.g. governments, employers, nursing organisations, regulatory bodies, unions, schools of nursing, etc.). For their part, nurses and their representative organisations can advance the development of positive practice environments by:

- Improving the recruitment and retention of nurses
  - Continuing to promote the nursing role
  - Defining the scope of nursing practice so that nurses work to their full potential for patient care. This legal framework can then be used to raise the awareness of other disciplines, as well as the public, of the profession's competencies and evolution
  - Lobbying for professional recognition and remuneration.
- Developing and disseminating a position statement on the importance of a safe work environment.
- Building capacity of nurses and others involved in health sector management and policy-making positions.
- Ensuring that the nurse voice is heard
  - Strengthening nursing organisations
  - Having access to decision-making bodies.
- Supporting research, collecting data for best practice, and disseminating the data once it is available.
- Encouraging educational institutes to enhance teamwork by providing opportunities for collaboration and emphasising teamwork theory.
- Presenting awards to health care facilities that demonstrate the effectiveness of positive practice environments through recruitment and retention initiatives, reduced drop-out rates, public opinion, improved care and patient satisfaction.
- Establishing alliances with other health professionals and health sector stakeholders, e.g. patients/consumer associations.

- Ensuring that other disciplines are involved in the development of policies for safe work environments.
- Developing a Call to Action detailing core elements of a positive practice environment that organisations and individuals can sign up to and support.
- Raising awareness, understanding and support of all relevant stakeholders about the positive impact healthy and supportive work environments have on the recruitment and retention of staff, patient outcomes and the health sector as a whole.

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The International Council of Nurses is a federation of 129 national nurses' associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses for nurses, ICN is the international voice of nursing and works to ensure quality care for all and sound health policies globally.

The International Centre for Human Resources in Nursing was established in 2006 by the International Council of Nurses and its premier foundation the Florence Nightingale International Foundation. The Centre is dedicated to strengthening the nursing workforce globally through the development, ongoing monitoring and dissemination of comprehensive information and tools on nursing human resources policy, management, research and practice.

## References

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<sup>11</sup> International Council of Nurses. *Nursing Matters: Nurses and Overtime*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Council of Nurses.

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