NURSING: A CHALLENGING PROFESSION

Chris L Peterson
School of Social Sciences
La Trobe University, Victoria.

In Australia the healthcare industry employs in excess of 700,000 people. Over the past two decades it has been growing more quickly than any other industry. Those working in healthcare experience different levels of risk to developing an illness and injury. Occupational stress is one hazard that is almost endemic to the healthcare injury, but within that industry there are wide variations.

According to the British Health and Safety Executive, stress is defined as 'the adverse reaction a person has to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them' (HSE, 2004: 2). In Australia stress is reported to cost $1.3 bill. and claims have increased four-fold in the past decade. Part of that cost was compensation ($200 mill.) and the rest is made up of the costs of lost productivity, absenteeism, turnover and poor work quality. The cost of stress is extensive. In 2002 stress had the greatest median cost and averaged as the second highest cost of all compensated illnesses and injuries. (Peterson, 2007).

In Australia for the purpose of compensation, mental stress (the category covering work related stress) has six categories. The Australian Safety and Compensation Council (ASCC, 2007) reports that the most common category compensated during 2004-2005 were, in descending order:
- work pressure, then
- harassment, followed by
- exposure to violence;
- other mental state factors, then
- traumatic events, and finally
- suicide or attempted suicide

There are many causes of stress. These include a lack of support from managers and supervisors; conflicts with coworkers; feeling that work is boring; poor interpersonal relationships; conflicts between home and work responsibilities; work overload; and job insecurity.

Stress in the nursing profession

The ASCC Interactive Compensation Database was utilized (http://nosi.ascc.gov.au) and it showed that during 2005-2006 Health and Community Services industry employees had the fourth highest incidence rate for stress out of all 19 industry groups. The incidence rate is the number of compensated claims out of 1000 employed. The rate was 1.4 per 1000 employees.

Peterson (2005) discussed the high rates of stress for nursing as a profession, and while there are variations between groups of nurses, the high rate has been constant for some time. In the year 2000 registered nurses had a much higher incidence rate of compensation than any other professional or paraprofessional group in healthcare.

Based on a different measure of stress compensation, the frequency of claims per 100 mill. hours worked, the rate of stress compensation for some male and female nursing groups is high compared to the national average, and in some cases higher than for any other workers. For male registered nurses and male caring and nursing assistants the rates of stress compensation during 2003-05 were high. They were comparable to the high rates for male primary and secondary teachers, but less than half the very high rate for male welfare and community workers (ASCC, 2007).

Of major significance, however, female nurse managers had a very high frequency of compensation rate per hours worked. In fact it was the highest rate per hours worked of any females employed, and at a rate 11 times the average for women. These figures demonstrate an extremely high rate of stress for some members of the profession.

There are many reasons why the health sector has high rates of stress, and why the nursing profession rates are high, particularly those of female nurse managers. The work of nurses is characterised by high work demands, the need to learn new technologies, to work to increasingly intensified schedules, and to respond to emergencies. In many cases their work is performed in both a bureaucratic and professional hierarchy, and some nurses may experience a lack of control. This may be the case for nurse managers. This is known as Karasek's Demand-Control approach to stress (Karasek, 1979, 1981). That is, stress occurs when a person experiences a lot of work demand but has a relatively small amount of control. Excessive hours worked and shift work with its changing routine also exacerbates stress. Poor management and supervisory practices have also contributed to stress outcomes. For nurses it may be the structure of work relations and their position in the power hierarchy that contributes to increased stress.

What can be done?

A risk management approach to stress is an effective way to create conditions at work that are conducive to relatively stress-free environments. It is a way that employers can get to see problem areas in jobs that produce stress, and a method of working together with employees on how to redress the stressful aspects of their jobs. The following method is a risk based approach that can reduce stress and help to deal with it. Managements need to:
- Carry out a risk assessment on the job, not the person
- Identify employees' skills and training needs
- Determine if the risk of stress is high or low
- Identify the major factors causing stress
- Consult with staff on what needs to be changed in the job
- Establish an action plan to deal with stress
- Evaluate how effective the action plan was in alleviating stress

Whether they are registered nurses or nurse managers, the same risk based approach can apply. Victorian Workcover Authority (2007a, 2007b) has downloadable software available to help run programs to bring about changes and reduce stress levels at work.

La Montagne and associates (2007) have identified a best practice approach taken by organizations in dealing with stress which would be applicable to the work of nurses. The least effective is to deal only with the stressed individual in offering stress management; next most effective is to bring about changes to the work to reduce stress outcomes; finally organizations which deal with both changes in the job as well addressing the needs of individual employees had the best stress reduction outcomes.

There are a number of areas in nursing which are conducive to high levels of stress. Risk based approaches are being shown to be the best way of dealing with stress related problems and provide a framework where management and nurses need to work together for solutions. Stress is a condition that creates large costs to individuals and is harmful to organizations through producing absenteeism, lost productivity and poor morale, and is in everybody's interests to address.

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