ENA Topic Brief

Healthy Work Environment

Key Information

- Skilled communication in a collaborative practice culture fosters a healthy work environment.
- An understanding of roles in a setting creates a structure for accountability.
- Appropriate staffing is necessary to ensure that safe, high quality patient care is delivered.
- Visible, knowledgeable leaders who are strong advocates for their staff must be present.
- Professional dialogue that supports evidenced based care decisions and professional growth are needed.
- Opportunities for ongoing learning, certification and research assure engagement of the team in care delivery.
- Recognizing the value of nurses’ contributions to care is important.
- Employees deserve a work environment free from violence.

Purpose

Most individuals at some point in their life span will find themselves in a work environment. While the setting, the type of work, the geographic location and the time spent may differ, it is clear that these hours spent in a work setting will have an impact on the individual. The purpose of this topic brief is to examine the components necessary to achieve and sustain a healthy work environment in the health care setting where nurses practice.

Overview

A healthy work environment is multifactorial. Physical safety, a positive psychosocial atmosphere, the ability to support the well-being of the caregiver and the ultimate outcome of safe patient care in an evidenced based and just culture framework are essential elements that factor into making the environment healthy. Groundbreaking reports published by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) brought national attention to the connection between work environments and patient safety and focused concentrated attention on the importance of a healthy work environment.\(^1\)

The health care environment that creates and maintains a culture of interdisciplinary collaborative practice and mutual communication among all caregivers has been shown to have more positive patient outcomes.\(^2\)\(^-\)\(^4\) In this type of culture there is zero tolerance for intimidation, bullying and episodes of all violence. The presence of an adequate number of nurses is necessary to allow the individual nurse needed time to provide high quality care, take necessary breaks for physical and mental health, support the educational needs of the patients and address referral issues that may be vital to patient outcomes. The workplace should be free of violent threats and actions with specific and focused efforts at creating a setting where physical safety is a priority. Personal health resources that include those related both to the physical and psychosocial needs of the nurse need to be available. It is not acceptable to expect the caregiver to skip lunch or work in settings where there is a lack of personal protective equipment. Without nursing leadership that is visible, credible and receptive to staff engagement in the evaluation of the workplace, barriers may exist that prevent the presence of a healthy productive place to practice. Transformational leadership can be conducive to successes in care as well as improved nurse retention and satisfaction. Practice settings that support nurses’ efforts to acquire degrees or certifications are strong environments where highly skilled and professional nurses can thrive. The integration of evidence based practices or ongoing research initiatives helps develop an increasingly knowledgeable nursing team that can
apply appropriate and accurate strategies to care.

There also is personal accountability for the individual nurse in the creation of a healthy work environment. Safe practicing health care workers need to be constantly cognizant of their functional capabilities and their role responsibilities in any given situation. A nurse who is unable to function in a manner capable of delivering high quality and safe health care, whether due to fatigue, illness or impairment needs to withdraw from the setting. It has been demonstrated that health care worker fatigue can result in adverse effects for patients as well as negative effects for the worker.\textsuperscript{5,6} Fatigue can result from inadequate sleep or prolonged working hours. Work schedules that allow for rest are needed. It is imperative that a non-punitive, fair and just culture be embraced in every setting so that error reporting that produces learning experiences and constructive policy and procedure change can exist. Nurses have been recognized as practicing in environments that have a high degree of exposure to significant levels of human suffering, crises and life changing tragedies. Discussions on compassion fatigue and the value of debriefing in the occurrence of these types of events are bringing new recognition to those who can lend support in these circumstances.

The journey of improvement needed to evaluate, establish and support a healthy work environment is a vital one for the well-being of the nurse, the safety of the patient and the accomplishment of quality outcomes in an efficient manner. The most significant barrier to achieving a healthy work environment is to accept conditions as they are and not embark on the journey at all.

**Tools**

There are tools available to assess the health quality of a work environment, help address issues that are encountered and increase reporting and promote positive change. Four recognized and readily available resources are:

- IOM report, *Keeping Patients Safe: Transforming the Work Environment*\textsuperscript{1}
- Team STEPPS,\textsuperscript{7} a tested approach utilizing proven communication strategies
- AHRQ survey\textsuperscript{8} on investigating the culture of patient safety in a hospital
- World Health Organization (WHO) Model for Action\textsuperscript{9} on building healthy workplaces

**The Future**

The call for a healthy work environment in health care is present. The WHO has endorsed a model for action that applies in any setting.\textsuperscript{9} Although the health of the workplace has traditionally focused on physical hazards, the WHO acknowledges that new direction is needed that includes psychosocial and personal factors as determinants of key fundamentals of a healthy work environment. While this speaks to the workplace in general, the IOM has clearly aligned the importance of a healthy work environment with patient safety. It is clear that the stakes are high – the actions needed to address the issues need to be explored and the strategies related to building and sustaining a healthy work environment need to be accessible.
Conclusion

Nurses face many challenges in their professional practice and frequently serve as strong advocates for their patients’ needs. This dedication to advocacy for their patients will assist nurses in becoming champions for building, fostering, monitoring and maintaining a commitment to developing the conditions necessary for a healthy work environment.

Definitions of Terms

**Compassion Fatigue:** Fatigue that results from caring for those who are suffering, facing a traumatic situation or who have undergone a tragedy.

**Healthy Work Environment:** A productive setting in which nurses and other health care providers are free from physical and psychosocial harm while maximizing their ability to provide safe, quality care along with meeting personal needs and empowering them to promote a satisfying work experience.

**Human Error:** A preventable non-negligent, non-malicious action that causes an actual or potential negative outcome.

**Just Culture:** A workplace culture that acknowledges human error as a reality and employs non-punitive means to investigate those errors while creating opportunities to learn from them in a framework of personal accountability.

**Transformational Leadership:** A leadership style in which the leader engages others in identifying the need for change, creates a vision to guide the change through inspiration and executes the change with the commitment of group members.

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References


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