Research RECAP

Generational Differences in Acute Care Nurses

What is this research about?

Canada faces a nursing shortage that is likely to worsen. As a result, recent research has focused on retention and recruitment of nurses. Some researchers have suggested that there are differences in recruitment and retention of nurses based on age. However, there is little evidence to support this idea. There are three generations of nurses in Canada that have different values, expectations and perceptions: Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1979) and Generation Y (born between 1980 and 2000). A fourth generation, Veterans, has passed retirement age of 65 years, and was not considered in this study.

This study explores generational differences of Registered Nurses (RNs) and Registered Practical Nurses (RPNs) working in Ontario acute care hospitals. The study looks at differences regarding nurse characteristics, employment circumstances, work environment and responses to work environment. Nurse characteristics included items such as sex, professional designation and educational level. Employment circumstances included items such

as shift length, shift type and hospital type. Work environment included items such as nurse participation in hospital affairs, manager support, and collegial nurse-physician relations. Responses to work environment included job satisfaction and burnout.

What you need to know:

Across generations, nurses rated their work environments poorly, job satisfaction low and levels of burnout high. However, important generational differences were identified. This information can be used to enhance generation-specific recruitment and retention strategies.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers analyzed data on 8,207 RNs and RPNs who responded to the Ontario Nurse Survey in 2003. Respondents were categorized as Baby Boomers, Generation X or Generation Y based on their date of birth. Researchers looked at differences in responses to questions about their own characteristics, employment circumstances, work environment and responses to their work environments.

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What did the researchers find?

Researchers found significant difference across generations of nurses in acute care environments.

Nurse characteristics and employment circumstances

- The majority of Baby Boomers work full time, while nearly half of Generation X nurses work part time.
- Generation X had the highest proportion of part time nurses and the highest proportion working 12-hour shifts.
- Generation Y nurses tended to work in teaching hospitals, often on medical-surgical units, while Baby Boomers more commonly worked in community hospitals.

Work environment

- All nurses rated their work environments poorly.
- Staffing and resource adequacy was the lowest-rated aspect of work environments for all generations.
- Nurse manager abilities were rated low by all generations.

Job Satisfaction

- Overall levels of job satisfaction were relatively low across generations.
- Baby Boomers reported higher rates of job satisfaction than younger generations.

Burnout

- Overall levels of burnout were relatively high across generations.
- Generation Y nurses reported the highest levels of burnout in areas of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

How can you use this research?

By understanding differences across generations of nurses in acute care settings, employers and nurse leaders can better tailor recruitment and retention strategies to specific generational needs. Health care institutions should consider:

- Providing more support for educational activities and career development opportunities to retain younger nurses;
- Helping nurse managers to enhance their abilities to support all nurses;
- Developing strategies to improve staffing and resources.

Original Article:

To learn more about this study, we invite you to read the original research article:

Widger, K., Pye, C., Cranley, L., Wilson-Keates, B., Squires, M., & Tourangeau, A. (2007). Generational differences in acute care nurses. Nursing Research, 20(1), 49-61.

About the Researcher

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