

Leadership support for *night staff*

By **Colleen Claffey**, RN, CEN, BSN



Staffing and retaining nurses for night-shift positions can prove daunting. The night shift isn't only physically demanding, but people who work at night often feel socially isolated and disengaged from daytime operations. Not to mention the unique aspects of caring for patients when the hospital isn't fully staffed with physicians and other specialists. For instance, deciding when a patient's condition warrants a middle-of-the-night call to his physician at home. Nurse leaders can ease some of the burdens on nurses who work at night, which in turn can improve clinical performance, enhance safety standards, nurture professional development, and promote retention.

Night shift by the numbers

Almost one-third of full-time healthcare employees are shift workers. About 11% of them work evening shifts, 9% work night shifts, and 3% work rotating shifts. The remaining people work split shifts.¹

Absenteeism among the nighttime workforce is 9%, compared with 3% for daytime workers.

Employee turnover in night-shift operations is 10%, compared with 3% in U.S. companies overall.²

Quality nursing management could greatly improve night staff retention. But, there's a gap in the literature regarding the impact nurse leaders can have on the job performance, staff satisfaction, and retention of night-shift workers. Creative management strategies could

maximize patient care delivery while optimizing healthy work environments for night staff.

Shift work takes a toll

Employees who work nights struggle to balance work, sleep, and personal needs. Research indicates that those who work night or rotating shifts face significant health and safety risks.³ Sleep deprivation is the most pervasive physiological effect. Shift work disrupts the circadian rhythm and forces the body to function at night, despite sleep signals such as decreased body temperature and increased melatonin.¹

Most shift workers get 25% to 33% less sleep than day workers and have poorer quality sleep.⁴ Night workers often struggle with chronic sleep loss, sleep deprivation, and on-the-job sleepiness.¹ The mistakes that led to the disasters at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl nuclear power plants both occurred between 11 p.m. and 7 a.m., and have been linked to workers' fatigue and sleep deprivation.⁴

Fatigue reduces productivity, and when combined with short staffing, can decrease the quality of patient care.⁵ A recent report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) concluded that no amount of training, motivation, or professionalism can overcome the performance deficits associated with fatigue, sleep loss, and the sleepiness that's due to circadian variations in alertness.⁶ Instead, the IOM suggests individual characteristics, sleeping habits, family life, and working conditions should be used as indicators for adjustment to shift work.⁶

Recent large studies offer more evidence that working nights may have serious effects on health. A 2001 study involving more than 800 American women found the risk of breast cancer to be 60% higher in those who worked nights.⁷ Night-shift workers also have increased

risks for colorectal cancer, infertility, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and gastrointestinal disorders.⁸

The Nurse's Shift Work Handbook discusses fatigue, irritability, reduced performance, and decreased mental agility.⁹ Fatigue is known to impair memory, vigilance, reaction time, and communication while causing cyclic reductions in alertness and performance.¹⁰ Night-shift workers have a 50% greater risk of bloodborne pathogen exposure than day-shift workers.⁴ Also, performance lapses and medication errors are most likely to occur between the hours of 3 a.m. and 5 a.m.¹

One study found that night-shift nurses reported lower levels of commitment to nursing. These lower levels of commitment directly related to low levels of staff involvement in schedule making and negative perceptions of career development opportunities.¹¹ Additional research found that poor control over work hours was a major source of dissatisfaction for night staff. As expected, an employee's ability to influence his or her schedule reduces absenteeism, promotes staff satisfaction, and improves unit morale.¹²

Factors that fight fatigue

Programs that educate nurses about the effects of fatigue have proven to be helpful.⁵ Nurse managers need a knowledge of fatigue, particularly its signs and patterns, to identify problems in nursing performance or patient care.

Exercising, eating well, and getting sufficient rest are especially important for night-shift nurses. Provide a safe and comfortable place to rest, encourage multiple short breaks, and ensure that nurses don't miss breaks. Studies have shown that napping at work is especially effective for workers who need to maintain a high degree of alertness, attention to detail, and ability to make quick decisions.¹³

Leadership that works for night staff

Night-shift nurses respond to different leadership styles than those who work day shift. And leadership behaviors more greatly affect the satisfaction of night-shift nurses than day-shift nurses. Some factors that might contribute to these findings include the lack of supervisory presence at night, the changes in work environment at night, increased job responsibility on the night shift, and greater social isolation at night.¹⁴ Shift workers feel isolated because they're at work when administration isn't, and often they have infrequent communication with management.

To combat feelings of social isolation and disengagement from daytime operations, managers and day-shift employees should acknowledge situational differences between night and day shifts and value night-shift nurs-

ing professionals. Disseminate information about the effects of shift work at all levels of the professional continuum. Acknowledge shift workers for the sacrifices and compromises they make and encourage night-shift nurses to offer their input and expertise. Make sure night-shift nurses feel involved, valued, and recognized by nursing management.

Most importantly, be visible in the work environment. Model desired staff behavior, be approachable, and communicate effectively with night staff. Less than 50% of shift workers feel that their managers communicate well with them. And most shift workers are more loyal to their crew than to their company, making them less responsive to information that comes from non-shift worker sources, including management.¹⁵

Nurses say their relationship with their manager is an important factor in job satisfaction and intention to stay. So, periodically work part or all of a night shift. Regularly conduct staff meetings with night-shift workers. Involve shift managers in daily decision-making processes. And keep staff informed by using bulletin boards, newsletters, or employee improvement committees.

Additional provisions should include keeping the cafeteria open at night, stocking vending machines with healthy food choices, providing adequate lighting in work areas, and promoting exercise and fitness programs. Providing these seemingly basic needs can boost staff morale and satisfaction.

Education is key

Ongoing education programs help shift workers cope with sleep, health, safety, and family difficulties. These programs are the most effective countermeasure to turnover and health issues related to extended work hours.⁵ Education about the perils of nighttime employment is

also essential. Plus, decisions about shift compatibility should begin with human resources at the time of employee hire.

Establish work environments that advance the education level of nurses from all shifts. Fostering professional and educational growth of night staff is important because new graduate nurses often occupy night positions and require strong leadership and preceptor training. Creating a night educator role or establishing a nighttime educational committee can be viable and productive.

The Atlanta VA Hospital ran a series of nighttime educational programs in which attendance ranged from 64% to 87%.¹⁶ Educational offerings that include both day and night staff promote team building and provide a means for vital communication and interaction among employees. Demonstrate concern for shift workers, show sensitivity to their educational needs, and allocate resources for education-based initiatives.

Shine a spotlight on night-shift nurses

More nurses will have to commit to shift work as the elderly population grows and patient care needs increase. Nurse leaders are in an ideal position to create supportive work environments that optimize employee performance and satisfaction, uphold patient care standards, and ensure organizational efficiency.

The use of strategies to combat shift work issues, such as fatigue and organizational disengagement, are necessary. Shift workers that feel respected, valued, and involved have improved morale, higher levels of job satisfaction, and tend to stay in their jobs. **NM**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colleen Claffey is a nurse educator in the emergency care center of Jackson Memorial Hospital, Miami, Fla.