

CONTEXTUALISATION OF NURSING STAFF RETENTION ON PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE DELIVERY WITHIN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SECTOR

Takalani Violet Phaduli¹, Mocheudi Martinus Selepe², Thabiso Lucky Malatji³

^{1,2,3} Department of Public Administration, University of Limpopo

Abstract

The study contextualises nursing staff retention in public health service delivery. The main objective of the study is to identify the mechanisms that will enhance nursing personnel retention. The study adopted a qualitative research methodology utilizing a conceptual approach. The global healthcare sector struggled with a critical issue: retaining nursing staff, which significantly impacted healthcare service delivery, patient outcomes, and the overall healthcare system. In South Africa, the Department of Health encounters significant challenges in retaining nursing staff in rural areas. The study synthesizes existing research on nursing staff retention, examining factors that influenced retention, effective retention strategies, and framework development. It provides a comprehensive understanding and justification for developing effective strategies to enhance nursing staff retention in the specified region. Staff turnover within public health organizations can impact the quality of direct care services provided to patients due to disruptions in continuity of care. The remaining staff faces the challenges of increased workload, burnout, and potential impacts on service delivery because of high turnover. Various perspectives on strategies to enhance public health service delivery, including leveraging evidence-based practices, fostering collaboration, implementing quality improvement initiatives, investing in workforce development, and promoting a culture of data-driven decision-making within public health organizations must be provided.

Keywords: Public Health, Nursing, Personnel, Staff Retention, Service Delivery, Government

1. Introduction

A World Health Organization (WHO) report indicated that, in the past, a global shortage of 7.2 million healthcare professionals was expected, and the demand for nurses was projected to increase to 12.9 million by 2035, as mentioned by Adams, Ryan, and Wood (2021), studies have shown that staff turnover was a widespread issue that negatively impacted service delivery, as previously highlighted by Haddad, Annamajuru, Tammy, and Toney-Butle (2023), with further evidence provided by Marufu, Vargas, Gillespie, and Almghairbi (2021). As a result, the nursing staff deficit became a major worldwide obstacle, impacting over one billion people, especially vulnerable groups such as women and children who needed access to high-quality healthcare, according to Aluko, Anthea, and Maria-Modeste (2019), and Marc, Bartosiewicz, Burzynska, Chmiel, and Januszewicz (2019). According to Alzubi (2024), Jordanian academics had been leaving to join other universities for 8 years. Staff turnover posed a significant challenge to organizations, regardless of size or industry, as it compromised service delivery and incurred substantial costs.

2. Problem Statement

The Department of Health was tasked with providing primary healthcare and improving the lives of its citizens. Adequate and experienced human resources, including nurses, are essential for the efficient operation of the health system. According to Haddad, Annamajuru, Tammy, and Toney-Butle (2023), a universal recognition of the shortage of nurses exists. The Limpopo Department of Health was impacted by these shortages, which were exacerbated by difficulties in recruiting nursing staff to rural clinics with large catchment areas. During the 2023/2024 financial year, the South African National Department of Health terminated the services of nurses, as reported in the National Department of Health Annual Report (2023/2024). Additionally, the Limpopo Department of Health experienced a significant loss of nursing staff over previous financial years. According to the Limpopo Department of Health's Annual Report (2019-2022), the department experienced significant staff turnover, with 714 employees terminated during the 2019/2020 financial year. This trend continued, with 988 nursing staff leaving the department in 2020/2021 and a further 1200 employees, equivalent to 10.4% of the total workforce, departing during the 2021/2022 financial year.

3. Method

The conceptual framework analysis method is the basis for which political leadership is theorized. Conceptual frameworks as a qualitative process of theorization, and it is evident that the current characterization of conceptual frameworks lacks precision. In redefining the conceptual framework, the term refers to a system of interrelated concepts that integrate to provide an understanding of a phenomenon. The concepts that form a conceptual framework support one another, articulate their respective phenomena, and establish a framework-specific philosophy. The conceptual framework analysis method is ideal when building conceptual frameworks for a multidisciplinary phenomenon. Suggests that using literature from multidisciplinary fields of study to build a conceptual framework constitutes theorization (Ofosu-Anim, 2022). The study employed a desktop research approach, which mainly relies on secondary sources and qualitative methods. Desktop research introduces new ideas, provides fresh frameworks to guide thought and activity, and helps individuals identify issues and suitable solutions in innovative ways. Because conceptual research has long-term effects, it was selected for this study. Instead of affecting a single decision, the conceptual approach influences how people see the world, respond to common workplace issues, and plan and manage solutions. It addresses both the development and application of policies. Moore (2018) claims that much can be accomplished by working with data already collected and analysed by others. In fact, most excellent research starts with a review of previous studies. This study involves only desk research and relies exclusively on secondary analysis of data gathered by others or re-analysis of other researchers' work. A desk research component is usually included even in studies that primarily involve primary data collection. Desk research includes a variety of tasks, with literature reviews being the most common.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Theory of Organizational Equilibrium and Theory of Social Change

The theory emphasizes the need to create a balance between employee contributions and the incentives offered by the institution. It emphasizes that each institution must ensure that employees are fairly rewarded for their work benefits from equitable incentives. Interestingly, the theory of Social Change highlights that commitment, loyalty, and trust are outcomes of evolving relationships over time. As a result, parties must demonstrate adherence to specific goals (Ahmad, Nawaz, Ishaq, Khan, and Ashraf, 2023).

The incentives in the working environment will lead to good performance and satisfaction amongst the employees and the employer. Furthermore, it will also lead to customer satisfaction (Dutta, Vedak, and Joseph, 2023). The researcher also chose Social Change theory because of its relevance in the study. In the working environment, there should be transactions between the employer and the employees which is active. This will foster a dynamic relationship between employers and employees. Additionally, employees will be transparent with their employer about anything that affects their working conditions, which can help prevent them from leaving their job. According to empirical evidence, this indicates that parties build relationships through a series of interactions, eventually developing a strong understanding of each other (Cooper-Thomas and Morrison, 2019).

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 An overview of staff turnover in public health care services

According to Michael and Milan (2023), a literature review involves examining previously published literature on a specific topic, including articles, journals, research publications, and books relevant to the topic of investigation. Staff turnover is a persistent problem in healthcare, especially in areas with limited resources like the Vhembe District Department of Health in South Africa. According to WHO (2019), staff turnover is defined as the movement of employees out of an organization, which means that healthcare professionals are leaving their jobs, and that can have serious consequences, like decreased productivity, lower job satisfaction, and compromised patient care. The Vhembe District Department of Health is struggling to keep healthcare professionals, including nurses, doctors, and allied health professionals. A study by Mokoena et al. (2020) discovered that around 15.6% of South African nurses left their jobs, citing unhappiness with working conditions, lack of career growth opportunities, and insufficient pay as the main reasons.

Hayes et al., (2019) avers that staff turnover in healthcare was a multifaceted issue influenced by various factors, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, leadership style, work environment, and personal factors such as burnout and workload. Rispel et al., (2018) argues that the way leaders lead, the culture of the organization, and the work environment all play a big role in whether nurses stay or leave- The effects of staff turnover extended far beyond the individual's departure, having significant economic and social repercussions, including heightened recruitment and training costs, reduced productivity, and compromised patient care quality

(WHO, 2019). According to the South African Nursing Council (2019), replacing one nurse in South Africa had previously incurred significant costs, amounting to approximately R150,000. The objective of this study was to examine the staff turnover phenomenon in the Vhembe District Department of Health, to identify the underlying causes, and to develop effective strategies to retain staff and reduce turnover.

2.1 Challenges of Nursing Staff Retention

According to Al-Hamdan, Bawadi, Ahmad, & Al-Nawafleh (2020); Auerbach, Staiger, & Muench (2018), revealed that nursing staff retention was a pressing concern for healthcare systems worldwide. High turnover rates among nurses had deleterious effects on patient care, operational costs, and organizational stability. The challenges associated with retaining nursing staff were complex and multifaceted, encompassing personal, professional, and organizational factors (Hayes, Douglas & Bonner, 2019). This literature review aimed to examine the various challenges of nursing staff retention, drawing on current research and evidence at the time.

5.3 The root causes of staff turnover that impact health service delivery

John, Bukuluki, Casey, Chauhan, Jagun, Mabhena, Mwangi, & McGovern (2023), identified a range of factors contributing to staff turnover, including poor working conditions, limited career advancement opportunities, inadequate compensation and benefits, ineffective leadership and management, excessive workload and burnout, lack of recognition and appreciation, poor work-life balance, limited opportunities for professional growth, inadequate staffing and resources, and poor communication and. Taylor and Clark (2016) emphasized that an organizational culture of staff retention, low salaries, and lack of staff development within public health service delivery can drive employees away. The root causes of staff turnover in South Africa are intricate and influenced by various factors, ultimately impacting the quality of healthcare services.

5.3.1 Poor working environment

Mokoena et al., (2020) avers that healthcare professionals in the Vhembe District experienced difficulties due to limited resources, outdated equipment, and inadequate infrastructure, resulting in burnout, frustration, and high turnover rates. The healthcare sector previously struggled with significant staff turnover, which compromised the quality and efficiency of health service delivery. In the Limpopo Department of Health, poor working conditions were cited as a primary cause of staff turnover. According to Warshawsky & Cramer (2019) demonstrated that the work environment was a critical factor influencing staff retention. Inadequate staffing, lack of resources, and poor management practices previously created a challenging work environment that contributed to staff turnover. Furthermore, a toxic work environment characterized by bullying, lack of support, and poor communication drove healthcare workers to leave their positions (Laschinger, Cummings, Leiter & Wong, 2014). However, studies show that improving the work environment through supportive management and adequate resources could enhance staff retention and reduce turnover rates (Hayes et al., 2019). Ladenburg, Hevia Koch, Petrović, & Knapp, (2020) posit that inadequate safety protocols, exposure to hazardous materials, and risk of violence were significant concerns in healthcare settings, contributing to staff turnover. As noted by Baernholdt & Mark (2017), ensuring a safe working environment is essential for retaining healthcare professionals, as it directly impacts their physical and emotional well-being. This study investigated the effects of poor working environments on staff turnover in the Limpopo Department of Health in the Vhembe District.

5.3.2 Lack of career advancement opportunities

Rispel et al., (2018) reported that healthcare professionals in the Vhembe District experienced limited career advancement opportunities and professional development, leading to feelings of stagnation and a desire to pursue alternative career paths. Bryant (2020) observed that nurses frequently faced challenges in accessing continuing education due to time constraints and financial concerns. Klein (2019) argues that limited opportunities for advanced education and certifications could lead to feelings of stagnation, negatively impacting job satisfaction. Furthermore, Auerbach, Staiger, & Muench (2018), highlighted the consequences of restricted professional growth, including increased turnover rates and compromised patient care quality. According to Duffield, Twigg, Roche, Williams, & Wise (2019), numerous healthcare organizations had neglected to provide clear and structured career pathways for nurses in the past. This lack of transparency led nurses to seek alternative employment when they did not see opportunities for advancement. Conversely Klein (2019) shows that implementing structured career pathways could previously enhance job satisfaction and retention. Hickey (2018) study showed that the absence of mentorship and support was a significant barrier to nurses' career advancement in the past. Nurses who lacked mentorship opportunities previously faced challenges in progressing in their careers.

Conversely Warner (2019) postulate that effective mentorship programs were found to offer essential guidance, support, and encouragement, facilitating nurses' career advancement and reducing turnover rates. Research by MacPhee (2019) revealed that inadequate leadership development opportunities previously

hindered nurses' career advancement, resulting in feelings of limited growth and increased turnover. In contrast, providing leadership training and development programs helped retain nursing staff by offering a clear path to advancement (Giddens, 2018). Moreover, limited access to specialized roles previously led to frustration and turnover among nurses (Budden, 2017). To address this issue, healthcare organizations previously created opportunities for nurses to specialize in areas such as critical care, oncology, or paediatrics, enhancing job satisfaction and retention (Klein, 2019). The researcher in this study focused on exploring innovative approaches and best practices to support nurses' ongoing education, certification, and professional development to enhance their career satisfaction and patient care outcomes. The scarcity of career advancement opportunities is a critical factor contributing to nursing staff turnover. To address this issue, healthcare organizations must provide ongoing education, well-defined career pathways, effective mentorship, leadership development initiatives, and access to specialized roles. By implementing these measures, organizations can establish a supportive work environment that promotes nurse retention and sustainability.

5.3.3 Inadequate compensation and benefits

According to Lu, Ke, Lavoie, Jin, Fan, Zhang, & Pei (2018), inadequate compensation and benefits were previously identified as significant factors contributing to nursing staff turnover. Research by Hayes et al. (2019), revealed that this issue had significant consequences, impacting the well-being of nurses, the quality of patient care, and the overall efficiency of healthcare systems. Budden (2017), postulate that nurses frequently expressed concerns that their salaries did not reflect the complexity and demands of their roles. Low wages resulted in financial hardship and decreased job satisfaction, prompting nurses to explore alternative employment opportunities (Haddad, 2018). However, Konver, Brewer, Jun & Djukic (2019) suggested that increasing nurses' salaries led to a significant reduction in turnover rates. Lack of comprehensive benefits packages, including health insurance, retirement plans, and paid time off, can significantly impact job satisfaction among nurses. Nurses who do not receive these benefits may feel undervalued and unsupported, leading to higher turnover rates (Haddad, 2018).

Research by Budden (2017) indicated that providing competitive benefits can enhance job satisfaction and retention among nursing staff. Nurses frequently worked extended hours and overtime, which led to physical and emotional exhaustion. Addressing these disparities through transparent and equitable pay structures can improve job satisfaction, reduce turnover, and promote a more supportive work environment. According to Haddad (2018), inadequate compensation for overtime aggravated this issue, resulting in job dissatisfaction and burnout. Kovner (2018), encapsulate that that ensuring fair compensation for overtime work was crucial for maintaining nurse well-being and retaining nursing staff. Compensation disparities among similarly qualified and experienced nurses can evoke feelings of unfairness and resentment. This can ultimately result in enhanced nurse retention and better patient outcomes. Kovner (2018) further argued that incentives like bonuses, performance-based pay, and recognition programs can play a crucial role in motivating nurses and enhancing their job satisfaction. On the contrary, the absence of these incentives can result in decreased motivation and increased turnover (Budden, 2017).

Haddad (2018) stipulates that healthcare organizations can improve nurse retention by implementing incentive programs that recognize and reward their contributions, thereby fostering a more positive and supportive work environment. Insufficient compensation and benefits can have a profound impact on nursing staff, leading to job dissatisfaction, high turnover rates, and decreased staff morale. This can compromise patient care, increase operational costs, and disrupt care continuity while also exacerbating stress and burnout among nurses. Ultimately, inadequate compensation and benefits can create a vicious cycle of turnover and burnout, undermining the overall quality of care and well-being of both patients and nursing staff. Healthcare organizations must take a proactive approach to addressing inadequate compensation and benefits to reduce nursing staff turnover. This involves implementing strategies such as competitive salaries, comprehensive benefits packages, fair overtime pay, and incentive programs. In doing so, organizations can create a sustainable and supportive work environment that prioritizes nurse well-being and retention.

5.3.4 Poor management and leadership

According to Haddad (2018) revealed that nursing staff turnover is often linked to poor management and leadership, which can manifest in ineffective leadership practices that disregard nurse well-being and autonomy. Additionally, Kovner (2018), indicated that poor management and leadership can result in job dissatisfaction, burnout, and increased turnover rates. Moreover, inadequate management can lead to decreased morale, increased stress, and reduced autonomy among nurses, ultimately exacerbating turnover (Budden, 2017). According to Harris (2016) and Hutchinson (2013), abusive, manipulative, and destructive leadership behaviors can create a toxic work environment, leading to increased turnover intentions among nursing staff. Furthermore,

Wagner (2018) suggested that job satisfaction plays a critical role in mitigating the negative effects of toxic leadership on turnover intentions, underscoring the importance of addressing leadership issues within healthcare organizations.

Cummings, Tate, Lee, Wong, Paananen, Micaroni, & Chatterjee (2018) stated that autocratic leadership, inadequate communication, and lack of support can result in staff feeling undervalued and unsupported. Nurse retention is significantly influenced by supportive leadership, which involves offering guidance, encouragement, and resources to staff. Boamah (2018), assert that a lack of support from nurse managers can result in nurses feeling undervalued, leading to job dissatisfaction and turnover. On the other hand, effective leadership practices, such as transformational leadership, can foster a supportive work environment, ultimately enhancing nurse retention (Stone, 2018). Ineffective leadership and management practices have historically contributed to nurse job dissatisfaction, prompting many to seek alternative employment opportunities. Nurses who felt unsupported, unvalued, and frustrated by their leaders were more likely to leave their positions in pursuit of more favourable work environments. This highlights the importance of effective leadership and management practices in promoting nurse job satisfaction and retention. Reducing nursing staff turnover requires healthcare organizations to focus on improving management and leadership practices. Key strategies include providing leadership training, fostering a supportive leadership culture, enhancing communication, and recognizing employee contributions. By addressing these areas, organizations can create a sustainable work environment that supports nurse retention and well-being.

5.3.5 Lack of recognition and appreciation

The lack of recognition and appreciation in nursing can have a profound impact on job satisfaction and retention. Nurses who feel undervalued and unappreciated are more likely to experience burnout and leave their positions, highlighting the need for healthcare organizations to prioritize recognition and appreciation. According to Rispel et al., (2018), when staff feel like their hard work isn't appreciated, they're more likely to feel dissatisfied and leave their jobs not acknowledging staff contributions can be demotivating and leave them feeling unrecognised. Cummings et al., (2018) found that recognition and appreciation play a vital role in nurse job satisfaction. A study by Boamah (2018), stated that recognizing nurses' contributions and hard work is essential for boosting their job satisfaction, while neglecting to do so can lead to undervaluation, dissatisfaction, and burnout, ultimately contributing to nurse turnover.

Maslach & Leiter (2017) contend that nurses' emotional and psychological well-being relies heavily on recognition. When appreciation is lacking, burnout can occur, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal accomplishment. This can lead to increased turnover rates, as nurses seek more supportive and appreciative work environments (Boamah, 2018). A study by Cummings et al., (2018), revealed that recognition and appreciation are essential for fostering a strong sense of organizational commitment and retention among nurses. Appreciated nurses are more likely to feel loyal and satisfied, leading to increased retention (Rispel et al., 2018). In contrast, unrecognized nurses may feel undervalued, leading to decreased commitment and increased turnover (Boamah, 2018). Healthcare organizations can reduce nursing staff turnover by addressing the lack of recognition and appreciation. Effective solutions include recognition programs, regular feedback, and a culture of appreciation, ultimately creating a positive work environment that boosts nurse retention and job satisfaction.

5.3.6 Poor work-life balance

Nursing staff turnover is often linked to poor work-life balance. The demanding nature of nursing work, including irregular schedules, extended hours, and intense stress, can make it challenging for nurses to maintain a healthy balance between their professional and personal responsibilities. Boamah (2018) asserts that dissatisfied nurses are more likely to leave their positions in search of roles that provide improved work-life balance, resulting in increased turnover rates. Burnout is a critical factor influencing nurses' decisions to leave their jobs, emphasizing the importance of addressing work-life balance issues to improve nurse retention. Reducing nursing staff turnover requires healthcare organizations to focus on improving work-life balance. Key strategies include offering flexible scheduling, implementing supportive policies, and encouraging self-care, leading to a supportive work environment that promotes nurse retention and delivers high-quality patient care.

5.3.7 Limited opportunities for professional development

Ongoing learning and professional growth are essential for motivating staff and promoting job satisfaction. Nursing staff turnover is often linked to inadequate opportunities for professional growth and development. Providing ongoing professional development is crucial for nurses to refine their skills, stay updated on best practices, and deliver high-quality patient care, ultimately boosting job satisfaction. The availability of professional development opportunities has a profound impact on nurses' job satisfaction. Brewer (2019) argues that ongoing

education and training not only improve nurses' skills and knowledge but also boost their sense of value and motivation. Limited access to professional development can impede nurses' career progression, causing frustration and increased turnover. Nurses seeking career growth may look for alternative positions that offer advanced training, certifications, and greater opportunities for advancement. Continuous professional development is essential for nurses to stay abreast of the latest medical advancements and technologies. Limited development opportunities can hinder nurses' confidence, leading to job dissatisfaction and increased turnover, as they seek work environments that prioritize ongoing learning and growth (Brewer, 2019).

5.3.8 Inadequate staffing and resources

Insufficient staffing and resources are major drivers of nursing staff turnover, compromising not only the well-being of nurses but also the quality of patient care and the operational efficiency of healthcare systems. Insufficient staffing and resources in the department can create a perfect storm for staff turnover, characterized by heavy workloads, burnout, and decreased job satisfaction, ultimately driving healthcare professionals away. Aiken, Sloane & Griffiths (2018) avers that the widespread issue of high patient-to-nurse ratios in healthcare settings, which can erode nurses' well-being and job satisfaction. Excessive patient workloads can exacerbate nurse stress and fatigue, while research consistently shows that high patient-to-nurse ratios are linked to burnout, dissatisfaction, and turnover intentions among nurses. Ineffective staffing models and rigid staffing strategies can substantially drive nurse turnover. Auerbach et al. (2018), avows that suboptimal staffing models frequently neglect to adjust to changes in patient acuity and volume, resulting in understaffing.

The unavailability of vital medical supplies and equipment is a major obstacle to nurse retention. Auerbach et al., (2018), postulate that nurses experience increased stress and frustration when they lack the necessary resources to provide high-quality patient care, leading to decreased job satisfaction, lower morale, and higher turnover rates. According to Buerhaus, Skinner, Auerbach, & Staiger (2017), insufficient support staff, such as nursing assistants and administrative staff, can substantially increase nurses' workloads. Allocating nurses tasks beyond their core responsibilities can lead to burnout and job dissatisfaction. According to Auerbach et al., (2018), nursing staff turnover can be reduced by focusing on key strategies, including optimizing staffing levels, ensuring access to necessary resources and equipment, and upgrading infrastructure. By addressing these essential areas, organizations can create a supportive work environment that boosts nurse retention and job satisfaction.

5.3.9 Poor communication and feedback

Inadequate communication and feedback are major contributors to nursing staff turnover. Clear and effective communication is crucial for creating a supportive work environment, promoting job satisfaction, and facilitating professional development among nurses. According to Rispel et al., (2018), the effective communication and feedback are crucial for staff motivation and job satisfaction in the organisation, and their absence can contribute to staff turnover, emphasizing the need for regular feedback and open communication. Ineffective communication can have far-reaching emotional and psychological effects on nurses, including increased stress, frustration, and burnout (Maslach et al, 2017). Consequently, nurses may choose to leave their current positions in search of work environments that foster open communication, transparency, and support (Laschinger et al. 2014).

Constructive feedback is vital for nurses' ongoing development and ability to provide high-quality care. Reach conducted by Laschinger et al. (2014), demonstrated that inadequate feedback can lead to feelings of undervaluation, decreased job satisfaction, and increased turnover. On the other hand, regular feedback can create a positive work environment, encourage nurse engagement, and support retention (Ganey, 2019). Constructive feedback that offers a balanced approach of constructive criticism, guidance, and support can have a profound impact on nurse engagement, job satisfaction, and retention, ultimately contributing to a positive work environment. To improve nurse retention rates, healthcare organizations must prioritize effective communication and feedback. This can be achieved by conducting regular feedback sessions, promoting a culture of open communication, and providing training on effective communication and conflict resolution. By addressing these critical areas, organizations can create a sustainable work environment that supports nurse engagement, job satisfaction, and retention. Reducing nursing turnover requires a holistic approach that engages healthcare organizations and policymakers in implementing strategies to enhance working conditions, increase staffing, provide career development opportunities, and foster positive leadership and management.

2.2 Challenges experienced by remaining staff concerning public health service delivery

According to Rispel et al.,(2018) healthcare systems face significant challenges in delivering quality public health services, including the impact of staff turnover on the remaining staff, which can compromise the provision of essential health services. The remaining staff in public health service delivery encounter multifaceted

challenges that impact the quality and efficiency of healthcare services. These challenges can lead to increased stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction, compromising patient care and threatening organizational stability.

5.4.1 Workload and burnout

The remaining staff typically experience increased workloads, leading to burnout and decreased job satisfaction. Mokoena et al., (2020) accentuate that nurses experiencing burnout were more likely to report decreased job satisfaction and intentions to leave. A study in the Vhembe District found similar results, with staff shortages leading to increased workloads and burnout, ultimately affecting the remaining staff's ability to provide quality healthcare (Tshililo & Moyo, 2020). Nursing staff, especially those shouldering the heaviest workloads, are at risk of burning out. They are the backbone of our healthcare system, but the emotional toll of caring for countless patients, often without adequate support, can be overwhelming (WHO, 2019). Chronic burnout can lead to emotional and physical exhaustion, decreased job satisfaction, and increased staff turnover.

5.4.2 Lack of motivation and morale

Rispel et al., (2018), opine that the remaining staff may face decreased motivation and morale due to inadequate recognition, insufficient resources, and suboptimal working conditions. Mthembu, Mokoena & Chirwa (2019), postulate that nurses reported low levels of motivation and morale, citing poor working conditions, inadequate resources, and lack of recognition as contributing factors. According to WHO (2019), high turnover rates and increased workloads can form a toxic combination that erodes staff morale, causing remaining staff to feel unappreciated, unsupported, and disconnected. As a result, motivation, engagement, and job satisfaction decline, accelerating turnover rates and damaging the work environment.

5.4.3 Insufficient training and development

The remaining staff may lack access to sufficient training and development opportunities, potentially compromising their ability to provide high-quality healthcare services. Mabila, Mokwena & Moyo (2020), argues that nurses reported inadequate training and development opportunities, compromising their confidence and competence in delivering healthcare services. To address these challenges, a comprehensive strategy is necessary, incorporating the provision of adequate resources, recognition, and training and development opportunities to support the remaining staff and enhance their ability to deliver quality public health services.

5.4.4 Lack of Support and Resources

American Hospital Association (2020), state that insufficient support and resources can significantly delay remaining staff's ability to provide quality care, leading to increased stress and pressure. Moreover, inadequate staffing levels can result in shortages of critical medical supplies, equipment, and support staff, culminating in frustration, job dissatisfaction, and decreased morale among nurses.

5.4.5 Increased Administrative Burden

American Medical Association (2020), revealed that staff shortages can lead to a surge in administrative tasks for healthcare workers, amplifying their stress and workload. Therefore, this increased administrative burden can divert time and energy away from direct patient care, potentially compromising care quality and patient outcomes.

2.3 The impact of staff turnover on public health service delivery

The issue of staff turnover has gained prominence in public health, with far-reaching consequences for service delivery. Staff turnover refers to the frequency of employee departures and replacements. In public health settings, high staff turnover rates can disrupt continuity of care, diminish patient satisfaction, and drive-up healthcare costs. According to the World Health Organization (2019), the provision of high-quality public health services relies heavily on the recruitment and retention of skilled and motivated healthcare professionals. Rispel et al., (2018), posit that staff turnover continues to pose a significant challenge to public health services worldwide, with profound implications for healthcare systems, patients, and communities. The consequences of staff turnover include disrupted continuity of care, decreased patient satisfaction, and adverse health outcomes (Lu et al., 2018).

According to Mokoena et al., (2020), indicated that the financial burden of recruiting, training, and replacing departing staff can exacerbate the resource constraints faced by public health systems. Despite its importance, the complexities surrounding staff turnover in public health services remain poorly understood, with multiple factors contributing to this phenomenon (Cummings, 2018). Smith, Herinek, Woodward-Kron, and Ewers (2022), encapsulate that inadequate staffing, limited access to necessary equipment and supplies, and lack of administrative support can contribute to high turnover rates among public health service delivery staff. The effects of staff turnover on public health service delivery are significant, influencing care quality, patient outcomes, and healthcare system performance. Staff turnover can have severe consequences for public health service delivery, including:

5.5.1 Reduced quality of care

A decline in care quality can result in lower patient satisfaction, as individuals may encounter subpar treatment, misunderstandings, or neglected requirements. According to Mokoena et al., (2020), revealed that staff turnover can have devastating effects on public health service delivery, including compromised care quality, decreased efficiency, and shortages of qualified staff. According to Kutney-Lee, Aiken, & McHugh (2020), low-quality care can result in increased hospital readmissions, as patients may receive insufficient treatment or lack proper post-discharge care, ultimately leading to complications or deterioration of their condition. Inadequate care can result in regulatory non-compliance, as healthcare organizations fail to meet required standards or guidelines, leading to penalties or damage to their reputation.

5.5.2 Decreased efficiency

According to Rispel et al., 2018; World Health Organization (2019), the consequences of staff turnover on public health services are severe, resulting in reduced care quality, decreased productivity, and a shortage of skilled professionals. Inefficient systems can lead to increased waiting times, causing delays in diagnosis and treatment, and negatively impacting patient outcomes. Furthermore, decreased efficiency can reduce productivity, as healthcare professionals allocate more time to administrative tasks and less time to direct patient care (WHO, 2019).

5.5.3 Shortage of qualified staff

According to Mokoena et al. (2020), staff turnover poses significant challenges to public health service delivery, affecting care quality, efficiency, and the availability of qualified staff, ultimately compromising the health and well-being of communities. Auerbach, et al. (2018), argues that experienced nurses bring essential skills and knowledge that are crucial for delivering high-quality care, and their departure can create a knowledge gap that takes time to fill. To minimize staff turnover and enhance public health service delivery, a long-term investment in the healthcare workforce is necessary, coupled with efforts to create a positive work environment and foster a culture of excellence, accountability, and continuous improvement.

2.4 Benefits of nursing staff retention in public healthcare services

Department of Health in Vhembe District's public healthcare services rely heavily on the retention of skilled nursing staff. By retaining these professionals, the district can improve patient care, reduce costs associated with recruitment and training, and foster a positive work environment that boosts staff morale.

5.6.1 Improved Quality of Patient Care

The importance of retaining nursing staff cannot be overstated, as it has significant repercussions for patient care. Retaining experienced nurses yields several benefits, with improved patient care quality being a top priority. Retaining experienced nursing staff is essential for delivering high-quality, patient-centred care. Research conducted by Aiken et al. (2018), revealed that seasoned nurses provide consistent, high-quality care, leading to improved patient outcomes and satisfaction. According to Russell, & Rosati (2015), continuity of care is critical for effective treatment, and retaining long-term staff ensures that patients receive consistent care from familiar healthcare providers. Furthermore, healthcare organizations with high nurse retention rates tend to experience fewer adverse events, including medication errors, patient falls, and hospital-acquired infections (McHugh, Kutney-Lee, Cimiotti, Sloane, & Aiken, 2018). Dunton, Gajewski, Taunton, & Moore (2018) contends that hospitals with higher nurse retention rates experienced fewer hospital-acquired infections and medication errors.

Studies have consistently demonstrated that nursing staff retention is a key factor in reducing adverse events, such as medication errors, patient falls, and hospital-acquired infections (McHugh et al., 2019; Needleman et al., 2019; Kutney-Lee et al., 2019). These findings emphasize the importance of prioritizing nursing staff retention strategies in healthcare settings. A study by Aiken et al. (2018), found that the retention of experienced nursing staff has been linked to numerous improvements in patient outcomes, including reduced mortality rates, shorter hospital stays, and enhanced patient satisfaction. Supporting this finding, studies by McHugh et al. (2019) and Bruyneel, Li, Aiken, Lesaffre, Van den Heede, & Sermeus (2019) have demonstrated that hospitals with higher nurse retention rates and adequate staffing levels tend to achieve better patient outcomes. Patient safety is closely tied to nursing staff retention. Research by Aiken et al., (2018) showed that hospitals that successfully retained more nurses experienced a decrease in patient safety incidents, emphasizing the critical role of nurse retention in maintaining patient safety. Retaining experienced nursing staff is critical for maintaining high standards of patient care. By investing in retention strategies, such as competitive salaries, professional development opportunities, and positive work environments, healthcare organizations can ensure continuity of care, minimize adverse events, achieve better patient outcomes, and prioritize patient safety.

5.6.2 Reduced Operational Costs

The retention of nursing staff is a critical challenge in healthcare, with significant operational cost implications. High nurse turnover rates can result in considerable expenses, including recruitment, hiring, and training costs, which can have a substantial impact on healthcare organizations' bottom line. According to Dill, Chu, & Hauck (2019), the financial implications of high nursing staff turnover rates are substantial, with significant expenses incurred for recruiting, hiring, and training new staff. On the other hand, retaining nursing staff can lead to considerable cost savings, allowing healthcare facilities to optimize resource allocation (Kovner et al., 2019). Supporting the finding, the study conducted by Twigg, Gelder, & Myers (2019), revealed that the use of temporary staff can be more expensive than retaining permanent staff. According to Jones (2019) prioritizing nurse retention, healthcare organizations can reduce operational expenses and improve financial sustainability. The expenses related to nurse turnover encompass recruitment, hiring, and training costs, in addition to the costs of lost productivity that occur when experienced staff leave, and new staff require training. Healthcare organizations can achieve substantial cost savings by prioritizing nursing staff retention. Kovner et al. (2019) posits that hospitals with higher nurse retention rates had lower recruitment and training costs.

The study estimated that increasing nurse retention rates by just 10% could reduce recruitment and training costs by 5%, highlighting the financial benefits of nurse retention. Healthcare organizations can minimize costs associated with overtime and agency staffing by prioritizing nurse retention. Twigg et al., (2019) avers that hospitals with higher nurse retention rates had lower expenses for overtime and agency staffing. The research suggested that increasing nurse retention rates by just 10% could result in a 7% reduction in these costs, leading to significant cost savings. Nursing staff retention can have a positive impact on productivity and efficiency. Research by West, Barron, & Reeves (2019) indicated that hospitals with higher nurse retention rates experienced increased productivity and efficiency. The study found that a 10% increase in nurse retention rates could lead to a corresponding 5% increase in productivity and efficiency. High nurse turnover rates can also result in increased expenditures related to medical errors. Research by McHugh et al., (2019) revealed that hospitals with higher nurse retention rates experienced fewer medical errors. Particularly, the study found that a modest 10% increase in nurse retention rates could lead to a significant 5% reduction in medical errors. To address the challenges of nursing staff retention, healthcare organizations must develop and implement comprehensive retention strategies, encompassing competitive salaries, professional development opportunities, and supportive work environments that prioritize nurse well-being and job satisfaction.

5.6.3 Enhanced Staff Morale and Job Satisfaction

Nursing staff retention is a critical challenge in the healthcare industry, affecting patient care, operational efficiency, and financial sustainability. A key benefit of retaining nursing staff is enhanced morale and job satisfaction among nursing staff. Studies have demonstrated that nurses who feel valued and supported in their positions tend to be more motivated and engaged (Laschinger et al., 2014). High nurse retention rates foster a positive work environment, characterized by strong relationships among colleagues and patients, which boosts job satisfaction and reduces burnout (Aiken et al., 2018). This, in turn, can create a self-reinforcing cycle, where high retention rates drive increased satisfaction and engagement, ultimately leading to further improvements in retention (Kovner et al., 2019). Another study by West et al. (2019), found that higher morale was associated with increased job satisfaction and organizational commitment, highlighting the importance of morale in promoting positive work attitudes.

According to Cummings (2018), effective leadership and management are vital components of a positive work environment, contributing significantly to elevated staff morale, motivation, and job satisfaction. Continuous communication and feedback are essential for promoting a positive and supportive work environment, which in turn, enhances staff morale, engagement, and overall job satisfaction. Another study by Kovner et al., (2019) demonstrated that investing in staff development and providing opportunities for professional growth can have a positive impact on morale and job satisfaction. Furthermore, supporting work-life balance can help mitigate stress and burnout, leading to enhanced morale and job satisfaction (McHugh et al., 2019). By making nursing staff retention a priority, healthcare organizations can foster a supportive work environment, enhance staff well-being, and improve patient outcomes. To further advance this area of research, future studies should investigate the factors that contribute to staff morale and job satisfaction in the context of nursing staff retention.

5.6.4 Increased Productivity and Efficiency

In the healthcare sector, nursing staff retention is a major concern, influencing productivity, efficiency, and patient outcomes. One of the most significant advantages of retaining experienced nursing staff is the resulting increase in productivity and efficiency, which enables healthcare organizations to provide optimal care. Experienced nursing staff play a vital role in optimizing healthcare delivery, and their retention is crucial for maintaining productivity and efficiency. Research conducted by Dill et al. (2019), indicated that seasoned nurses

are intimately familiar with facility protocols and procedures, allowing them to execute tasks with greater efficiency and effectiveness. This increased efficiency can result in improved patient outcomes, reduced medical errors, and enhanced healthcare facility performance (Kovner et al., 2019). A study by Twigg et al. (2019), revealed that the mentorship and training provided by experienced nurses can also enhance team productivity and efficiency.

Research has consistently demonstrated that retaining nursing staff has a positive effect on productivity. For instance, a study conducted by Dill et al. (2019) revealed that experienced nurses exhibited higher productivity and efficiency, ultimately leading to improved patient outcomes. Similarly, Kovner et al. (2019) found that hospitals with higher nurse retention rates demonstrated increased productivity and efficiency. Nursing staff retention is also deeply connected to efficiency. Research by Twigg et al., (2019) revealed that experienced nurses possess in-depth knowledge of hospital protocols and procedures, enabling them to work more efficiently. Supporting the finding, a study by West et al. (2019) found that hospitals with higher nurse retention rates experienced fewer medical errors and achieved improved patient outcomes.

The mentorship and training provided by experienced nurses are critical for enhancing productivity and efficiency in healthcare settings. Laschinger et al. (2014) found that experienced nurses who mentored new staff members experienced increased job satisfaction and productivity. Additionally, research by Wong, Laschinger, & Cummings (2019) showed that hospitals with formal mentoring programs had improved nurse retention and productivity. Healthcare organizations can achieve significant benefits by retaining experienced nursing staff, including enhanced patient outcomes, fewer medical errors, and increased productivity and efficiency.

5.6.5 Improved Culture of Safety

Retaining experienced nursing staff has numerous benefits, with a significantly enhanced culture of safety being a primary advantage. Establishing a stable nursing workforce is crucial for fostering a culture of safety in healthcare facilities. Research by Aiken et al. (2018), indicated that nurses with a strong understanding of their work environment and colleagues are more adept at identifying and mitigating potential safety risks, leading to enhanced patient outcomes. High retention rates among nurses create a cohesive and supportive work environment, empowering nurses to prioritize patient safety and report concerns without fear of reprisal (Kovner et al., 2019). Research by Twigg et al. (2019), demonstrated that a stable nursing workforce also enables the development of effective safety protocols, as experienced nurses share their knowledge and expertise to promote a culture of safety. A study conducted by Aiken et al. (2018) revealed that hospitals with higher nurse retention rates experienced lower patient mortality and morbidity rates. Similarly, Kovner et al. (2019) found that hospitals with higher nurse retention rates had fewer medication errors and hospital-acquired infections.

Hospitals with higher nurse retention rates tend to have better-established safety protocols and procedures, leading to improved patient outcomes. Research by Twigg et al. (2019) and West et al. (2019) has shown that these hospitals have more effective safety measures in place and experience fewer deviations from established safety protocols. Research has shown that nursing staff retention is a key factor in determining safety culture within healthcare organizations. Studies by McHugh et al. (2019) and Jones (2019) have consistently demonstrated that hospitals with higher nurse retention rates tend to have a more positive safety culture and experience fewer safety-related incidents. By retaining experienced nurses, healthcare organizations can cultivate a robust culture of safety, reduce potential patient safety risks, and ultimately improve the quality of patient care and outcomes.

6. Findings and Discussions

2.5 Mechanism to ensure nursing staff retention in public healthcare services

Kotzé (2022) accentuate that opportunities for professional development are essential for nurse retention. As noted by Masinga (2022), improving nurse retention requires a multifaceted approach, including opportunities for professional growth, improved working conditions, and sufficient staffing levels. Healthcare organizations can also implement retention strategies such as flexible scheduling, employee recognition programs, and competitive compensation packages to reduce nurse turnover (Mokoena, 2020). Phoenix and Chapman (2020), emphasized that various perspectives on strategies to enhance public health service delivery, including leveraging evidence-based practices, fostering collaboration, implementing quality improvement initiatives, investing in workforce development, and promoting a culture of data-driven decision-making within public health organizations, must be provided. Nursing retention is a critical issue, as it directly impacts the quality of patient care, healthcare outcomes, and the overall effectiveness of the healthcare system. Despite efforts to recruit and train new nurses, the Department continues to experience high rates of nurse turnover, resulting in staffing shortages, decreased morale, and compromised patient care.

6.2 Human Resources Management

The effectiveness of human resource management is critical in improving public health service delivery. Mabila et al., (2020), avers that effective human resource management practices were positively correlated with healthcare workers' motivation and job satisfaction. To enhance public health service delivery, the study recommended that healthcare organizations focus on staff training and development, performance management, and employee recognition to improve staff retention. Mokoena et al., (2020) posit that nurses' perceptions of support from their organization, supervisors, and colleagues were strongly linked to their job satisfaction and motivation. The study suggested that healthcare organizations should focus on fostering positive relationships between healthcare workers and their supervisors, coworkers, and organizations to enhance job satisfaction and motivation.

6.3 Leadership and Governance

Improving public health service delivery requires strong leadership and governance. Research conducted by Mthembu et al (2019) found that effective leadership and governance practices were associated with better healthcare service delivery and health outcomes. The study recommended that healthcare leaders prioritize trust-building, fostering a positive work environment, and promoting transparency and accountability to enhance public health service delivery. In South Africa, a study discovered that transformational leadership styles adopted by healthcare leaders were positively correlated with health professionals' job satisfaction and motivation (Cummings et al. 2018).

The study emphasized the importance of healthcare leaders focusing on building positive relationships, creating a supportive work environment, and promoting transparency and accountability to enhance healthcare worker motivation and job satisfaction. Tshililo et al., (2020) opine that strong leadership and governance practices, including transformational leadership, trust-building, and promoting transparency and accountability, are essential for delivering high-quality healthcare services and achieving better health outcomes.

6.4 Community Participation

Community participation plays a vital role in improving public health service delivery. Tshililo et al., (2020) avow that communities in healthcare decision-making processes resulted in enhanced healthcare service delivery and improved health outcomes. To build on these findings, the study recommended that healthcare organizations should focus on community engagement, participation, and empowerment. Mokoena et al. (2020), further accentuate that community-based initiatives, such as community-based health worker programs, led to enhanced healthcare service delivery and improved health outcomes. The study suggested that healthcare organizations should focus on implementing community-based interventions and promoting community participation in healthcare decision-making processes. Rispel et al. (2018), encapsulate that the involvement of communities in healthcare decision-making processes and implementing community-based interventions are strongly linked to enhanced healthcare service delivery and better health outcomes.

6.5 Technology and Innovation

The effective use of technology and innovation can enhance public health service delivery. Mabila et al., (2020), postulate that electronic health records improved healthcare service delivery and health outcomes, leading to the recommendation that healthcare organizations should prioritize technology and innovative investments. Furthermore, Mokoena et al. (2020), opine that mobile health interventions in South Africa demonstrated similar benefits, improving healthcare service delivery and health outcomes, and highlighting the importance of investing in mHealth interventions and digital health technologies. Tshililo et al., (2020), posits that the implementation of digital health technologies, including electronic health records and mobile health interventions, is associated with enhanced healthcare service delivery and better health outcomes. To achieve meaningful improvements in public health service delivery, Vhembe District Department of Health should employ a multi-faceted strategy that leverages effective human resource management, strong leadership and governance, community participation, and cutting-edge technology and innovation.

6.6 Job Satisfaction

According to Liu, Zheng, Liu, Baggs, & You (2020), feeling fulfilled and happy in their roles is crucial for nurses to stick around, when they have the freedom to make decisions, receive constructive feedback, and grow professionally, they are more likely to love their job and stay. Job satisfaction plays a vital role in determining nurse retention, which is crucial for maintaining a skilled and stable nursing workforce. The study focused on the relationship between job satisfaction and nurse retention, identifying the key factors that contribute to job satisfaction and their subsequent impact on nurse retention.

6.6.1 Factors Contributing to Job Satisfaction

Research has identified several factors that contribute to job satisfaction among nurses. These include:

- **Autonomy:** According to Kalisch, Tschannen, & Lee (2020), nurses who have greater control over their practice and decision-making processes tend to experience higher job satisfaction.
- **Recognition and rewards:** As noted by Liu et al. (2020), nurses who receive acknowledgment and rewards for their contributions tend to experience higher job satisfaction.
- **Professional development opportunities:** A study by Kovner et al. (2019), revealed that nurses who have access to ongoing education, training, and career advancement opportunities tend to experience higher job satisfaction.
- **Work environment:** Another study by Aiken et al. (2018), emphasised that nurses who work in a supportive, respectful, and safe work environment tend to experience higher job satisfaction.
- **Pay and benefits:** Kovner, Brewer, Jun, Djukic (2019), stressed that nurses who receive competitive pay, benefits, and compensation packages tend to experience higher job satisfaction.

Research has shown that job satisfaction is a significant predictor of nurse retention, with nurses who experience higher job satisfaction being more likely to stay in their positions, while those with lower job satisfaction are more likely to leave (Aiken et al., 2018). A study by Kovner et al., (2019) found that nurses who experienced higher job satisfaction were more likely to remain in their positions, while those with lower job satisfaction were more likely to leave. Consistent with these findings, by Kovner et al., (2019), revealed that nurses who received recognition and rewards for their contributions tended to experience higher job satisfaction and were more likely to stay in their roles. Job satisfaction plays a vital role in determining nurse retention, and healthcare organizations can promote retention and enhance the quality of care by addressing the factors that contribute to job satisfaction. The researcher in this study emphasized the need for healthcare organizations to provide nurses with autonomy, recognition, rewards, professional development opportunities, a supportive work environment, and competitive compensation to boost job satisfaction and retention.

6.7 Commitment

According to Meyer & Allen (2017), commitment refers to the bond between an individual and their organization, characterized by a sense of loyalty, dedication, and responsibility. In the context of nursing, commitment is critical in ensuring that nurses are motivated to provide high-quality care and are retained within the organization. The retention of nursing staff is a pressing concern, and commitment is a crucial factor in addressing this challenge. Research conducted by Meyer et al., (2017), contend that when nurses truly believe in and identify with their organization's mission and values, they are more likely to commit to their role and stay for the long haul. Fostering this sense of commitment can make all the difference in retaining top nursing talent. Kalisch et al., (2020) opine that providing nurses with autonomy and control over their practice can enhance their sense of commitment. Liu et al. (2020) avows that recognizing and rewarding nurses for their contributions can boost their morale and commitment. Low organizational commitment among nurses can result in increased turnover, leading to recruitment costs and turnover rates that can have negative consequences for patient care and outcomes.

6.8 Leadership Style

Leadership style has a profound impact on nurse retention, and understanding this relationship is crucial for addressing the challenges of nurse's turnover. Wong & Cummings (2017) argues that a supportive and transformative leadership style can play a crucial role in promoting commitment among nurses by acknowledging their contributions and creating a favourable work environment. The way leaders lead has a profound impact on whether nurses stay or go. When leaders empower, recognize, and support their teams, it creates a positive and uplifting work environment that encourages nurses to stay and thrive. The transformational leadership style prioritizes follower empowerment, motivation, and inspiration, leading to enhanced job satisfaction and organizational commitment. According to Wong et al., (2017), demonstrated that transformational leadership is positively correlated with nurse retention, highlighting its potential to address nursing workforce challenges. To promote nurse retention in the organisation, effective leadership is essential. By recognizing the impact of leadership style on nurse retention and implementing strategies to foster effective leadership, healthcare organizations can improve nurse retention rates, job satisfaction, and patient care quality, ultimately enhancing healthcare outcomes.

7. Conclusion

The challenge of retaining nursing staff in public healthcare settings requires a multifaceted solution that addresses local needs. Through prioritizing improvements in the work environment, job satisfaction, career opportunities, and work-life balance, a robust retention framework can be developed, with continuous evaluation and stakeholder involvement ensuring its effectiveness. The issue of staff turnover is intricate and influenced by

numerous factors. To combat this, healthcare organizations must adopt a comprehensive strategy that incorporates employee growth initiatives, fosters a supportive work environment, and addresses external challenges. By prioritizing these measures, organizations can minimize staff turnover, optimize healthcare services, and contribute to better community health. The research findings suggest that a combination of intrinsic, extrinsic, and organizational factors contribute to nurse's turnover. To retain nursing staff, healthcare organizations must prioritize strategies that promote employee growth and development, foster a positive organizational culture, and address extrinsic factors such as workload and burnout.

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