

## Acute Shortage of Nursing Professional in Pakistan

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### **Abstract**

*Human resources for health are known as one of the core building blocks for health care system. The health care system is facing a serious challenge of the lack of human resources. It is very difficult to put the model of qualified and right people in the right place in Pakistan because of rapid growing of population. The existing health institutions, facilities and services are not sufficient to cope with the health care provision to all people in Pakistan. Retention of nurses in health care system is a main concern to nursing communities throughout the world. Pakistan has made a big step in getting better access to health services since its independence and development of public health in the country at partition era in 1947. Although Pakistan is in the list of developing countries where the health care system is still on life support in which nurses have significant role in Human Resource for Health (HRH). Advanced Nursing Services in Pakistan needs to meet the health requirements of community and to face future challenges in health care setting. But shortage of nurses has been a constant challenge for nursing profession in many countries including Pakistan.*

*Although nursing is a noble profession, but our gender prejudices, negligence and ill-treatment has caused enormous damage to it. A big cause of migration of nurses from Pakistan to gulf- countries is due to the reason that nursing has bright future in such places and is given its due respect. It is important to give the identification, value and required facilities to this profession as it will benefit the society at vast level.*

### **Introduction**

Nursing profession is a part of healthcare system focused on the detail-oriented care of individuals, families, and communities in attaining, maintaining, and recovering optimal health. According to Akhtar and Sherin (2014) Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world with approximately 190 million populations, with around 64% of the population living in the rural areas. According to Naeem, Ahmad & Shaukat (2013) “total Government expenditure on health per capita is =04%”.

Yusufzai (2013) “Pakistan’s health care system is hamstrung by an acute shortage of nursing professionals. The most dissatisfying factors at work place are high workload, stress, and unfair nursing management, lack of appreciation, low monetary incentives, and rigid behaviour on the part of nursing management. The shortage of nurses is the result of “brain drain” from low income countries to high income countries”.

Buchan notes: (2008) “Shortage of nursing is a problem which undermines the effectiveness of the health system and needs to be solved. Until and unless this is understood and make better use of the available evidence which is condemned to endlessly repeat a cycle of inadequate, uncoordinated, obsolete and often inappropriate policy responses”.

Nurses have an important role in Human Resources for Health (HRH). In Pakistan, inadequate primary care workforce is incapable of managing a patient with multiple chronic illnesses. As a result, the numbers of chronically ill people admissions in tertiary-care hospitals continue to rise. Emergency departments of tertiary hospitals are used as alternative of original ambulatory and community-based models of care to manage the effects of chronic illness and thus the outcomes are expensive and below expectations. Furthermore these hospitals are unable to manage such complex patients with the shortage of personnel and

advance technology. The demand of the health workforce in developing countries like Pakistan is still slow, moving against communicable and other fatal diseases.

According to Admin (2013) "Nursing has put into practice innovative models of care that promote the goals of policymakers for health reforms like expanding access, improving quality and safety, and reducing costs. Extending the models of care to the general public will be difficult without action to strengthen the future nurse workforce".

According to Chauhan (7, December 2014) "the medical sector in Pakistan has historically been more preoccupied with cure rather than care". As a result, while the country continues to produce an enormous number of doctors every year, the nursing workforce has mostly been ignored. Regardless of their central role in patient care, they are rarely given the attention or identification they deserve, which has inevitably led to a rigorous shortage of nurses in the country.

## Nursing situation in pakistan

Nurses are backbone in the health care system and the modern health system cannot excel in performance without professional nurses. The nurses communicate with the patients on a more personal level, such as history taking and giving quality care to the patient according to their diagnosis. Health care system with a limited number of nurses is unable to function effectively. While technology, diagnosis, and treatment are vital to the health system, quality of care will remain a myth without a strong arm of patient care provided by nursing staff.

According to Iftekhar (6, Jan 2015) "there are around 136 institutes that offer degrees, diploma and certificate programmes of nursing in Pakistan, but these institutes are not enough to produce the desired number of nurses".

In Pakistan, the coexistence of nursing shortage in the domestic market and outflow of nurses to international markets is also known as a common problem. Particularly these nurses are migrating towards gulf countries to look for excellent service opportunities. At the same time, novice nurses are required to fill the gap between supply and demand in the domestic level.

Pakistan Nursing Council (PNC) is a sovereign, regulatory body constituted under the Pakistan Nursing Council Act (revised in 1973) and empowered to register (license) Nurses, Midwives, Lady Health Visitors (LHVs) and Nursing Auxiliaries to practice in Pakistan.

The actual number of nurses in Pakistan is indefinite, and the approximate numbers are usually different from reality. Government pointed-out that Pakistan need about 60,000 nurses but another study indicates that there is a shortage of 1 million nurses in the country. In 2009, "there were 47,200 Registered Nurses; 4,752 Lady Health Visitors (LHVs) and 3,162 midwives. PNC estimated (2008) nursing professionals to population ratio of 1: 3568 for nurses and 1: 54,276 for LHV; and the nurse: physician ratio was 1: 2.5". (Dawn Review, 2003) Nishtar et al (2013) "this dearth of the nurses becomes evident in light of the reversed doctor to nurse ratio of 2.7:1 in the country".

According to Asma (2012) "WHO international standards are the ratio of doctors to nurses should be 1:3 however this is reversed in the case of Pakistan ratio of doctors to nurses is 3:1". Dawn.COM (2009) "In Europe there are 4.2 nurses per doctor but in our country the situation is opposite, i.e. we have 4.5 doctors per nurse". The Express Tribune, (24, June 2011) "the International Standards of patient care require 8 nurses for 1 doctor but in Pakistan there is only 1 nurse existing for 3 practising doctors and in some areas this ratio is as low as 1:6".

According to Gul (2008) "The World Health Organization (2004) statistics shows that Pakistan has 4.6 nursing and midwifery personnel and 6.9 physicians per 10,000 populations". Jamal, S. A (2009) supported that WHO statistics "Pakistan has one of the lowest nurse-to-population ratios in the world or fewer than six nurses for every 10,000 people".

According to Chauhan (7, December 2014) figures cited by the Journal of Pioneering Medical Sciences (2013) "the existing nurse-patient ratio in Pakistan is approximately 1:50

whereas the ratio prescribed by the Pakistan Nursing Council (PNC) is 1:10 in general areas and 2:1 in specialized areas". Albeit with variations, "the nurse to- patient ratio in hospitals is as low as 1:60". Pakistan observer (16, Feb 2013)" supported that even in some hospitals a nurse is looking after 50 to 60 patients".

People's perception of nursing is strongly influenced by nurses' availability and the quality of nursing care which they receive. According to Gul (2008) Bradshaw (2000) and Mullen (2003) "this is an important not only for Pakistan, but also worldwide, where the ratio of qualified nurses to patients is shrinking, and much of nurses' foundational role at the bedside has been taken over by a variety of healthcare assistants".

Nursing shortage can be local, regional, national or global which leads to failure in improving health services. Express Tribune (7, December 2014) "the shortage of nurses, however, is not just a local problem. Infact, the downward trend is affecting medical care worldwide". According to Admin (2013) the World Health Organization (WHO) "estimated that the world needs to increase the number of health workers by more than four million to achieve the global health goal in 2015 set by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)". Globally shortage of nursing is not just a governmental challenge or a topic for financial analysis, but it affects the health care system.

### **Causes of shortage of nurses**

The causes for the acute shortage of nursing staff in Pakistan are complex. One wonders why with such a population explosion, the shortage of nurses still exists. In Human resources nursing in Pakistan is mainly a female profession, so the low status of women in Pakistani society impacts significantly on the profession. Nurses are treated as blue-collar workers. The girls, who join nursing profession, mostly belong to lower-income groups and society treats them with least respect. According to Gul (2008) "the low socio-economic status of nurses, unsafe work environment, lack of respect from doctors, and the very nature of nurse's work create a dichotomy in society's attitude towards the nursing profession". According to Chauhan that Rattani stated (7, December 2014) "Nursing is not the first choice for many. It isn't considered as well- reputed profession".

The Joint Learning Initiative Report in 2004 and the World Health Report in 2006 have listed "Pakistan has one of the 57 countries with critical workforce deficiencies". According to Akhtar and Sherin (2014)" health system in Pakistan faced the challenges of governance; finances; service delivery; human resources; introduction of new technologies; and coping with huge burden of supplies requirement".

Many socio-cultural, economic, and political factors affect the image of the nursing profession in the country, are thought to be responsible for the current status of nursing. Traditionally, Pakistan is a patriarchal society which indicates that women are primarily accountable for household and child bearing, and rearing activities; and men are accountable for economy and decision making in the families. According to Naeem et al (2013) "Female nurses are facing all sorts of social and moral threats from male dominant society and do not feel comfortable and secure to work in non- conducive environment". Gul (2008) "Muslim families may not view modern nursing as an appropriate profession for their daughters because nursing requires both close interaction with members of the opposite sex and work outside the home".

Pakistan is not preparing sufficient number of nurses necessary to meet the needs of the increasing population. However under preparation is not the only cause of nursing shortage in Pakistan. There has been a major brain drain to gulf countries for excellent job opportunities. Gul (2008) "many wards in Pakistan in hospitals do not have a regular supply of linens or soap and water for hand washing. Such issues of work surroundings provide as push factor to many nurses for good standard to work out of the country than in Pakistan".

The media plays a negative role, because the media does not only influence the public perception of nursing, but also activates a poor self-concept among nurses. Gul (2008) also

supported that “lack of public awareness about the nursing profession is a big factor that impacts negatively on the image and desirability of the nursing profession”.

The perception of unsafe working conditions contributes to increase shortage and hinders local and national recruitment efforts. The frequency of depression among nurses is reasonably high. Prolong exposure to such depression without correct coping strategies, may emerge as a potential risk factor for many diseases. Furthermore high patient to nurse ratios, dissatisfaction with the quality of work, poor leadership, and insufficient empowerment at work place related to burnout and poor job satisfaction signify the shortage of nurses. Shumaila et al (2014) “The job dissatisfaction can produce stress and depression with resulting down fall in job performance”. In addition nurse’ patient workload increases the risk of error, risk of spreading infection to patients and staff, and risk of occupational injury. High turnover of nurses lead to higher cost for the employer and the health care system.

To sum up, the causes of nursing shortage in Pakistan include; insufficient number of quality nursing education institutes ; feminist perception of nurses as females only; lack of career advancement in nursing profession; lack of continuous nursing education; appearance of wrong image of nurses in electronic media; lack of law implementation on sexual harassment; lack of safety policies; lack of incentives for remote placements; lack of law implementation on horizontal and vertical bullying; lack of monetary incentives, and poor working conditions are in most of the public as well as private hospitals.

### **Way forward management**

Nurses are the backbone in health care system. They take care of the patients round the clock persistently even in physical and psychological stress. According to Naz and Gul (2014) “Nursing profession is hectic and stressed so they need more comfortable work environment to perform their duties and they also deserve equal right like other employees who are working in other organizations, e.g., wages and benefits, suitable working environment, acknowledgment and promotion opportunities”.

Human resource management is a fundamental pillar of the health system that is responsible for any country’s most important benefit to its people. When countries invest in people wisely, the result is a satisfied and stimulated workforce to deliver high quality health services. Then country can achieve its health objectives, and contributes to the community by providing excellent services. In addition revision of rules and regulations according to rapid increasing population is necessary for achieving International Millennium Goal Standards 2015.

The nursing profession has been experiencing a workforce shortage in recent years which make the nurses valuable resource. The extensive shortage of nurses is mainly due to the emigration to developed countries in search for excellent salary and job. The work-life issues threatening retention of nurses is the serious concern for health administrators. Simple evidence-based low cost strategic measures can improve the retention of nurses. According to Hamid et al (2014) “Simple measures requiring better management practices could substantially improve the working environment and hence retention of nurses”. Consistent and committed workforce can also function more efficiently and effectively.

According to Cohen (2007) “we also need to recognize the effect of our behaviour outside of the workplace. Hospitals’ orientation programs and conducive working environment can be more cost-effective in the long term”. Recognizing problems and dealing with them positively and proactively is the cost-effective way forward in management. It includes transport facility and better working environment; appropriate pay and benefits; revising job plans; regular vaccination programme; ensuring adequate working hours; adequate number of nurses to share the workload; responsibilities and provision of enough resources; and appropriate physical working conditions, can contribute in retention of nurses in Pakistan.

The best way to handle with the stress is to eradicate its causes, so the stress should be dealt as preventive. Social support and relaxation techniques can be helpful in stress. Healy & McKey (2000) “The key interventional strategies for managing work-related stress in relation

to nursing are prevention, timely reaction and rehabilitation". Shumaila et al (2014) "Nurses perform their duties with care and dedication; they must be stress free and satisfied with the job environment". Stressful situation can overcome by immediate providing comprehensive and supportive working environment and by education. In addition the nurses should be encouraged to support the evidence of exercise and good nutrition.

The literature identifies several factors affecting the job satisfaction among nurses such as positive interpersonal relationships (truthfulness, belief, participation of general values) and quality of care, have been related to higher levels of job satisfaction. When nurses perceive patient care as central to their work, then job satisfaction improves. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities, balanced workload, and reward for effort are also associated with job satisfaction. The most satisfying factors are working with an internationally reputable organization, getting positive feedback from patients, and the availability of necessary resources.

Gul (2008) "Even though significant changes have occurred in nursing education in Pakistan the overall status of nursing in the country is still a concern". Improvement in nursing education is known as positive effect on nursing image. Yet, to improve the recruitment and retention of nurses in Pakistan the overall societal image of nursing must be improved; otherwise Pakistan will continue to produce nurses only to meet the demand of nursing for other countries.

The different issues have been affected by unprepared decentralization processes. The ideal recommendations regarding the key issues of national and international agencies should be given critical knowledge of defining the necessary human resource. The national human resource managers, who are developing training programs, should prepare comprehensive policies. The research studies can support to focus on improving the knowledge of workforce environment. It is also essential to identify the strategies which empower nurses for motivation and their performance after decentralization, and analyzing the most cost-effective best practices.

Overall the demand for nurses is growing as a critical part of the health system to give quality health care. It is very important for nursing profession to assist the nursing leadership and health sector to come with multiple societal perspectives. The policies for the safety of nursing profession are essential because nurses are working in the private and public sectors worldwide.

## Conclusion

Nursing is a Nobel profession and is an important part of the health care system nationally and internationally. Pakistan has been categorized as one of the 57 countries that are facing Human Resource Health (HRH) problems, under the threshold level defined by WHO to deliver the essential health care required, reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015. The above mentioned contributing factors specifically in nursing profession haven't changed much over the years, but continuous dichotomy in recruitment and retaining of qualified nurses appears to affect the profession's performance.

It is very difficult to control the nursing shortage without improving or eradicating negative factors that impact the status of nursing. People in Pakistan have less knowledge about the profession of nursing, and this need to well built marketing methods to develop the image of the nursing profession by providing good quality care of the patient and by giving awareness through media.

It is very important, if any profession needs to attract, retain, develop and capitalize their human resources, then they will need to adopt systematic human resources measures rather than relying upon the human resource practice. Assurance from the government, acceptance from the public, and leadership ability among the nursing population are critical requirements which can enable the profession to provide quality care to the patients and to lessen the shortage of nurses in Pakistan.

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