Janet E. Burton

Is Your Work Environment Healthy?

The work environment of medical-surgical nurses and nurses of other specialties has been the subject of many studies in the last few years. Fortunately these studies have brought the idea that nurses cannot provide excellent care in an environment of disrespect and incivility to the forefront. I personally can join the ranks of other bedside medical-surgical nurses who can share stories about unhealthy work environments.

I remember once being summoned to the evening shift supervisor’s office, where she informed me that I had been chosen to be hypnotized by a physician. This physician claimed there was no staff member on duty that he could not hypnotize. The supervisor countered his claim by stating she was sure there was one person he would not be able to hypnotize, thus my summons to her office. Did I feel threatened? Yes. Did I feel I had no way out? Yes. I was much younger then and it was not accepted in those days to refute authority. Besides, the physician was between me and the door, so I could not simply walk out of the office. Was he successful? No. I mentally willed myself to not give him control of my mind.

The AMSN leadership has asked the MedSurg Matters! Editorial Committee to write a series of articles on the characteristics of an unhealthy work environment (UWE) and to identify strategies to change the workplace culture to a positive environment. Some of the topics to be discussed in this series are nurse-physician relationships, bullying, “eating our young,” generational differences, management support, and wellness of employees. This first article will set the stage by defining a healthy work environment (HWE) and identifying the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) Magnet® status attributes of an HWE.

Nickitas (2008, p. 390). This environment will have a nursing leadership team that promotes a culture where negativism, demoralizing, and unsafe working conditions are no longer acceptable. AANC states that nursing’s work environment “must be safe, healing and humane, respectful of the rights, responsibilities, needs and contributions of patients, their families, nurses and all health professionals” (2005, p. 5). Research by Aiken, Clarke, Sloane, Lake, and Cheney (2008) supports the belief that hospitals that achieve the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) Magnet® status have the characteristics of a HWE for nurses. Although research supports this belief, it is also possible to have a HWE in an institution that has chosen not to pursue Magnet status.

AACCN created a nine-member panel to develop standards that describe a HWE. Once the panel’s work was completed, the standards were validated by 50 expert reviewers (AACCN, 2005). The standards are evidence-based and are in alignment with competencies for health care professionals which are recommended by the Institute of Medicine. The standards do not address patient safety, nursing education and credentialing, or clinical practice because these areas are addressed by other regulatory and professional groups.

The six AACCN standards for establishing and sustaining HWEs are: skilled communication, true collaboration, effective decision-making, appropriate staffing, meaningful recognition, and authentic leadership.

Skilled communication is described by AACCN as “a two-way dialogue in which people think and decide together” (2005, p. 16). This standard requires the nurse to be as skilled in written, verbal, and nonverbal communication as he or she is in clinical skills. Ineffective professional relationships lead to mistrust, disrespect, stress, and dissatisfaction. A HWE will have a zero tolerance policy for negative and disruptive behavior in the workplace (AACCN, 2005).

AACCN describes true collaboration as “a process, not an event” (2005, p. 20). This process centers on mutual respect for the knowledge and abilities of all professionals involved in a patient’s case. The result of this type of collaboration is safe and quality patient care.

A nurse, as the single constant person present during a patient’s hospital stay, is responsible for the patient’s safety, is a patient advocate, and collects data that are used by other professionals in making patient care decisions. In spite of other professionals seeing the nurse as responsible for patient safety, few physicians actually regard nurses as effective members of the decision-making team. The nurse is a vital link in the decision-making process and must be a valued member of this process (AACCN, 2005).

Appropriate staffing is one of the hot topics across the nation today. It is well-documented that adequate staffing with an appropriate number of registered nurses results in better patient outcomes and nurse satisfaction as well as less nurse turnover and burnout. Staffing models must be flexible and able to adjust to changing patient’s needs rather than focusing on a fixed nurse-
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patient ratio. Appropriate staffing means there must be a match between patient needs and nurse competence (AACN, 2005).

Every nurse longs to be recognized by his or her peers and nursing leaders as being a valued member of the health care team. AACN (2005) proclaims that meaningful recognition is a central element of the HWE and is essential to the growth and development of nurses. Inadequate recognition is often cited as the primary reason nurses leave a place of employment or the nursing profession altogether.

AACN (2005) describes the nurse leader in a HWE as being a skilled communicator, a team builder, positive change agent, committed to service, results-oriented, and a role model for collaborative practice. Nurse leaders must embrace the concept of a HWE and be positioned to influence decisions that affect nursing practice and the work environment.

Is your workplace healthy? Has it been “diagnosed” as being unhealthy and on a “treatment plan” for changing the culture? AMSN is concerned about the environment that nurses work in and has established a task force on Nursing Work Environment. The purpose of this task force is to examine work environmental issues and develop a toolkit containing resources that are timely and helpful to the medical-surgical nurse in creating a healthy work environment. Along with this new column in MedSurg Matters!, AMSN plans to provide you with assistance in establishing, enhancing, and maintaining a healthy work environment.

References


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Write for us! Do you have something to say about healthy work environments? Send us an email at msnnews@ajj.com if you’d like to share your thoughts in an upcoming column.