




Determinants of Nursing Staff Engagement in Nursing Care in Slovenia

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Abstract

Edited by: Mirko Spiroski

Citation: Kondić N, Starc J. Determinants of Nursing Staff Engagement in Nursing Care in Slovenia. Open Access Maced J Med Sci. 2023 Oct 05; 11(G):111-119. <https://doi.org/10.3889/oamjms.2023.11655>

Keywords: Nursing staff; Nursing staff engagement; Factors of commitment; Model of factors of commitment

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Received: 05-May-2023

Revised: 25-Sep-2023

Accepted: 26-Sep-2023

Copyright: © 2023 Nenad Kondić, Jasmina Starc

Funding: This research did not receive any financial support

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist

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BACKGROUND: Understanding employee engagement enables management to increase the connection between the employee and the mission of the work organization. Employee engagement is linked to high employee satisfaction and, at the same time, high performance in work organizations.

AIM: The aim of the study is to develop a theoretical model of the determinants of employee engagement in nursing, to illustrate the complex problem of employee engagement in nursing in Slovenia, and to examine and identify the factors that influence the strengthening of employee engagement.

METHODS: This review was guiding using preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses review protocol incorporating the research question of "What are the most important factors of nursing staff engagement in nursing care in Slovenia?" The databases used in this review include Scopus, PubMed, COBISS, CINAH, and MedLine.

RESULTS: Based on the analysis of scientific articles and monographs, we developed a theoretical model of the determinants of employee engagement in nursing, which we classified into six subcategories: Management, leadership, communication, education, career development, and quality nursing service.

CONCLUSION: The impact of engagement factors on employees in work organizations is reflected in more engaged and better quality service delivery, lower absenteeism, higher employee satisfaction, and greater effort in different areas of work.

Introduction

The challenges in healthcare institutions are sound financial management, good staff relations, good working and living conditions, staff and patient satisfaction, and the provision of quality care services for the people they care for. It is therefore important for management in healthcare institutions to place emphasis on employee engagement; because only by increasing the level of engagement of employees can we improve their level of performance, which can only be achieved by management knowing the factors that lead to engagement.

The concept of engagement was pioneered in the 1990s by Gallup, one of the world's leading management research houses, which identified employee engagement as one of the five most important challenges in a work organization [1]. According to Kahn [2], engagement at work requires three psychological conditions: Meaningfulness, safety, and accessibility. Employees can express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally through their work roles. Different authors define employee

engagement differently. For example, Schaufeli *et al.* [3] define employee engagement as employees' enthusiasm for their work, whereby employees have a high level of energy to perform their work, Bakker and Demerouti [4] define employee engagement as employees feeling happy, joyful, and enthusiastic about their work, seeing their work as a way to achieve personal goals and not seeing it as a burden but perceiving it as important, energetic and interesting, Devi [5] notes that engagement is the behavior of an employee who spontaneously puts effort into their work, going beyond the demands of the job by putting extra energy, effort and time into their work, Leiter and Maslach [6] define employee engagement as the behavior of an employee who puts effort into their work, and who goes above and beyond the demands of the job by putting extra effort, energy, and time into their work, Gruban [7] defines engagement as the willingness of employees to contribute to the best of their abilities, on their own, without external coercion, Abraham [8] defines engagement as a high level of satisfaction and emotional connection to the work organization, which results in increased innovation, productivity and loyalty of employees to the work organization, and Sharma and Kaur [9] define engagement as the psychological

investment of an employee in his or her work such that his or her social and intellectual behavior is focused on the goals of the work organization. Employee engagement can also be defined as employees' discretionary effort to feel important and to perform their work with passion or to go the extra mile [10]. Brečko and Mejas [11] add that energy directed toward achieving the organisation's goals is defined as commitment.

In fact, over the last decade, nursing staff engagement has become an increasingly important concept for managers in health-care settings to retain nursing staff in nursing, as high quality and highly engaged nursing staff are extremely important for quality nursing care in all health-care settings. They also recognize that a committed workforce can lead to greater productivity, innovation, and efficiency while reducing the costs associated with recruitment and retention [10].

Employee engagement in health-care settings is influenced by various factors: Management, leadership, recruitment, training and career development, occupational health, and safety [12], [13]. It is the management in these settings that needs to take care of quality internal communication among employees, as this is the key to engaged employees and influences higher productivity and maintenance of process work methods [14]. An individual health-care facility can lose up to 40% of its total revenue due to ineffective management and employee disengagement in healthcare alone, which in turn affects the quality of service [15].

The aim of this study was to develop a theoretical model of the determinants of nursing staff engagement based on the analysis of scientific articles, to present the complex problem of nursing staff engagement in Slovenia, and to examine and identify the factors influencing the strengthening of nursing staff engagement.

Database Search

The search of literature was carried out between January 2023 and March 2023. A systematic and structured electronic search was conducted from the four primary databases, including Scopus, PubMed, COBISS, CINAHL, and MedLine. To assess the quality of the original research and review articles analyzed, we used the criteria that, according to Vogrinc [16], are most appropriate for assessing the quality of a literature review in qualitative research. These criteria are authenticity, background knowledge, communicability, and comprehensibility. The literature search was conducted using specific keywords: "nursing," "nursing staff," "engagement factors," and "engagement factors model." Original research and review articles in full text

written in English and Slovenian were only included in the study.

In the final analysis, we included original research and review articles in full text that were based on genuine and unbiased statements and contained accurate and credible data. We checked the background of each study. Based on the criterion of message value, we included studies that were rich in content or that contained relevant information in terms of the objectives of the specific research. Finally, we assessed the quality of the document on the basis of its comprehensibility, which included both technical aspects and comprehensibility of the content. For the latter, we looked for literary language, possible grammatical errors, and technical terms that could make it difficult to understand the content of the document. A total of 97 articles were found using the mentioned database searching strategies, while 62 studies were disregarded due to their lack of relevance. Finally, 35 studies were included in this study and further examined to give a comprehensive summary of the field's advancement. For each paper, the following information was summarized and narratively described: Author, year of publication, type of study, and the methods used to determine the factors of engagement of nursing employees.

Discussion

The available information from recent studies showed that an increasing number of nursing staff in health-care settings are dissatisfied, as insufficient staffing and overworking of health-care staff make it impossible to provide quality and holistic care to the care recipients [17]. Due to the longer working hours of nursing staff and higher workloads for the same pay, nurse managers in special social care institutions find themselves in a situation where they, as managers, are managing an exhausted workforce that is constantly under stress, which contributes greatly to organizational inefficiency, absenteeism, reduced quality and volume of nursing care delivered, increased health-care costs, and reduced job satisfaction [18]. This results in increased labor costs, greater difficulty in providing a level of quality nursing care due to high absenteeism among staff, significantly lower job engagement, and increased professional errors and negligence in the delivery of nursing care [19]. Disengaged employees experience job dissatisfaction and negativity, generate less added value, lower quality of care services, and higher rates of absenteeism [20]. This is because nursing staff in special social care institutions become disengaged in their work precisely because of those internal and external factors that do not support their professional development and job satisfaction [21],

which leads to frequent complaints from care recipients and their relatives or guardians, which can result in high compensation payments [19].

For example, Milojevic [22] in a survey of 100 nurses at the Clinical Department of Vascular Neurology and Neurological Intensive Care in UKC Ljubljana found that 51% of nurses are unengaged. She points out that the key factors for increasing nurse engagement are education, caring for employees, talking to employees, and experienced management that is familiar with motivational techniques and employee interests. She also stresses the importance of understanding and managing the factors that influence employee engagement in nursing. A similar finding was made by Tillott *et al.* [23] in Australia, where they explored the factors influencing organizational culture and the underlying elements that affect Australian nurses' engagement in the workplace. They found that organizational culture plays an important role in nurse recruitment and retention. They believe that maintaining a good organizational culture is important for maintaining a caring attitude, job security for nurses, autonomy at work (empowerment of nurses), and an equal and equitable attitude toward all nursing staff, which in turn influences their work environment and increased engagement at work. They point out that it is the role of managers to implement strategies that support a positive organizational culture in the workplace, leading to lower nurse turnover, higher nursing staff engagement, and better patient outcomes. Canadian authors Bamford *et al.* [24] and Wong and Giallonardo [25], also found that nurses who have a credible leader experience greater job satisfaction, more commitment to their profession, more trust, and fewer adverse patient outcomes. Horvat [26] survey of 57 nurses in the Maribor Health Centre also found that nurses most miss praise and recognition for a job well done by a manager and the feeling that their opinion is taken into account.

Meanwhile, in Spain, a study of a sample of 100 nurses in two major Spanish hospitals found that nurses are exhausted and stressed at work, leading to burnout and disengagement syndrome [27]. In Japan, where a study was conducted on a sample of 1075 nurses from 54 wards, Watanabe and Yamauchi [28] found that the mental health of nurses suffered as a result of overtime work and the resulting increased workload, resulting in significantly lower work engagement. Tomažič [29] in her study of 474 nurses from General Hospital Ptuj and University Medical Centre, Maribor, comes to similar conclusions, namely, that stress is the most important factor influencing nurses' disengagement.

In a 2011–2012 survey of non-profit organizations and companies in 19 countries in Western Europe, Gallup found that on average only 14% of employees are engaged, while 66% are disengaged and 20% are actively engaged. Slovenia ranks in the average of Western European countries in the survey,

with 15% engaged, 70% disengaged and 16% actively disengaged. Gallup finds that this distribution is due to youth unemployment, while for the rest of the working-age population, it finds that employees have low confidence in being able to find a second job in the labor market and prefer to stay in the middle of the labor market, where they are not committed to work [30]. According to Gallup, the consequences of disengagement for national economies can be very severe. For example, on average, employee disengagement costs the UK economy between £52 and £70 billion per year, and the German economy between €112 and €138 billion per year [31].

Understanding the concept of engagement increases the connection between the employee's work and the mission and vision of the work organization. By improving employee engagement, the work organization creates opportunities for connection between all employees and the wider organization, creating an environment where employees are motivated, engaged, and connected to their work [29]. The factors of employee engagement in nursing enable nursing management to deliver high performance in the provision of quality nursing services [32]. Engaged employees in nursing are more creative, productive, loyal, have less sickness absence, and have higher job satisfaction in their work [33].

Management interest in the concept of employee engagement in health-care settings is on the rise [34], [35]. Nursing employees are involved in the process of delivering quality nursing services on a daily basis, and it is therefore very important that they are engaged in their work. Nurse managers need to be aware that strategic management and human resource development are the keys to engagement and, of course, to increasing the quality of nursing and care services [36]. Lowe [32] points out that it is employee engagement and its measurement that is a prerequisite for maintaining and delivering quality services in the work organization. Only committed employees are willing to put more energy and enthusiasm into their work and are more committed to their work organization.

We note that currently in Slovenia, engagement in the work of nursing staff is a relatively new basic HR concept, which has only become relevant in the public administration in the last few years, during and after the COVID pandemic, when we started to face high levels of absenteeism and turnover. The field of employee engagement in nursing in healthcare institutions in Slovenia is very poorly researched.

The factors that influence staff engagement vary considerably from one health-care setting to another [37]. The factors that influence nursing staff engagement are divided into work and personal factors. Work engagement factors are social, physical, and organizational and can enable nursing staff to be more connected, more committed to achieving the goals of the health care facility, lower labor costs, less

absenteeism, acquire new skills, be more motivated, and achieve personal growth and development [38]. While personal factors are the emotional, physical, and affective belonging to the healthcare institution, which must ensure that nursing staff see meaning in the performance of their work [39], [40], [41]. Gruban [42] identifies four key factors that influence nursing staff engagement. He integrates them into the WI-FI model: (1) Well-being: Identifies the external (work-life balance) and internal (social and social responsibility) aspects of employees; (2) information: Employees have a clear vision of what they want to achieve and where they want to go, where the organization they work for is heading and why, and how employees are involved in achieving this vision; (3) fairness: Employees know clearly what is expected of them in the work process, are engaged in personal and professional development programs, are fairly rewarded, and recognized for a job well done; and (4) involvement: Involves active, two-way discussion with employees in the work process or in the workplace. Involving employees in internal communication processes.

The Institute for Employment Studies [37] identifies the most common factors that influence employee engagement as: (1) The nature of the work: Employees in work organizations need to perceive their work as exciting and creative. They need to feel that performing their job tasks is important to them and to their colleagues; (2) meaningful and clear purpose of the work: Employees in work organizations need to take pride in the work they do, experience it as a mission and feel that their work contributes to improving the work process. (3) Opportunities for personal and professional development: To be successful in their work, employees in work organizations must have the relevant skills and be given the opportunity to acquire new skills. Opportunities for personal and professional development should be encouraged by managers and work organizations and mechanisms for employee development should be provided; (4) recognition and reward: Employees should feel valued by their colleagues and the organization (personal income from work and rewards should not be the only motivator, which in practice is often found to be a factor in employee disengagement); (5) recognition and reward: Employees should feel valued by their colleagues and the organization (personal income from work and rewards should not be the only motivator, as it is often found to be a factor in employee disengagement in practice). Regular praise and recognition for work are the key to increasing employee commitment in work organizations; (6) employee relations: The manager-employee relationship is particularly important in employee relations. It is important to take the time to listen to each other. Employee autonomy and respect for the individual as a person is an important factor in employee relations in work organizations; (7) communication: It is important that employees understand the organizational values and

objectives, as this will make them more committed to their work. Employees should be involved in the decision-making process and their opinions should be taken into account; and (8) inspirational leadership: Managers and leaders need to inspire confidence and autonomy in employees, as this will increase their commitment to their work tasks. They must be honest and fair in their judgments and duties while fostering a sense of value, inclusion, and belonging among employees. Cataldo [43] adds that when these factors are taken into account, nursing staff in health-care settings will be significantly more committed to their work, which will be reflected in greater trust in the health-care setting, a desire to do things better, a better understanding of the context and the bigger picture of the health-care setting, a willingness to go the extra mile, a willingness to help and respect patients and colleagues, and a willingness to actively develop their own area of work in nursing. Žonta [44] in her comprehensive model of engagement factors highlights leadership, communication, employee engagement and motivation, and organizational culture together with work processes as key factors. Veingler-Čič *et al.* [10] state that the most important drivers of employee engagement in nursing are career opportunities, reputation, communication, management performance, reward, innovation, and career planning, with career opportunities still remaining the most important driver of employee engagement. Zupan [45] takes a similar view, arguing that a work environment that provides engagement factors such as employee support, communication, mutual respect, trust, inclusion, and positive attitudes toward the work organization and its values, as well as working resources and working conditions, is important for increasing employee engagement in nursing. Royal and Sorenson [46] point out that employees in health-care settings face obstacles and negativity in the workplace on a daily basis, but it is up to the individual to decide how to respond to the daily challenges. Despite engagement factors, it is up to the employee to decide how to approach challenges and which engagement factors to choose. Brank and Brank [47] also identify the most common elements of employee engagement factors in nursing as mutual respect, communication, and the importance of work that enables employees to grow.

Dedicated nursing staff bring very positive outcomes for the healthcare institution as they are highly committed to their work, more creative, proactive, and enthusiastic about their work, resulting in better psychophysical well-being. They also represent a positive and energetic connection to work, have high energy levels, are more efficient, more productive, more motivated, more satisfied, and more committed to their patients [48]. They often experience more positive emotions, are in better health, and show better performance at work [20]. According to Vorina *et al.* [49], committed nursing staff are energetic workers who work

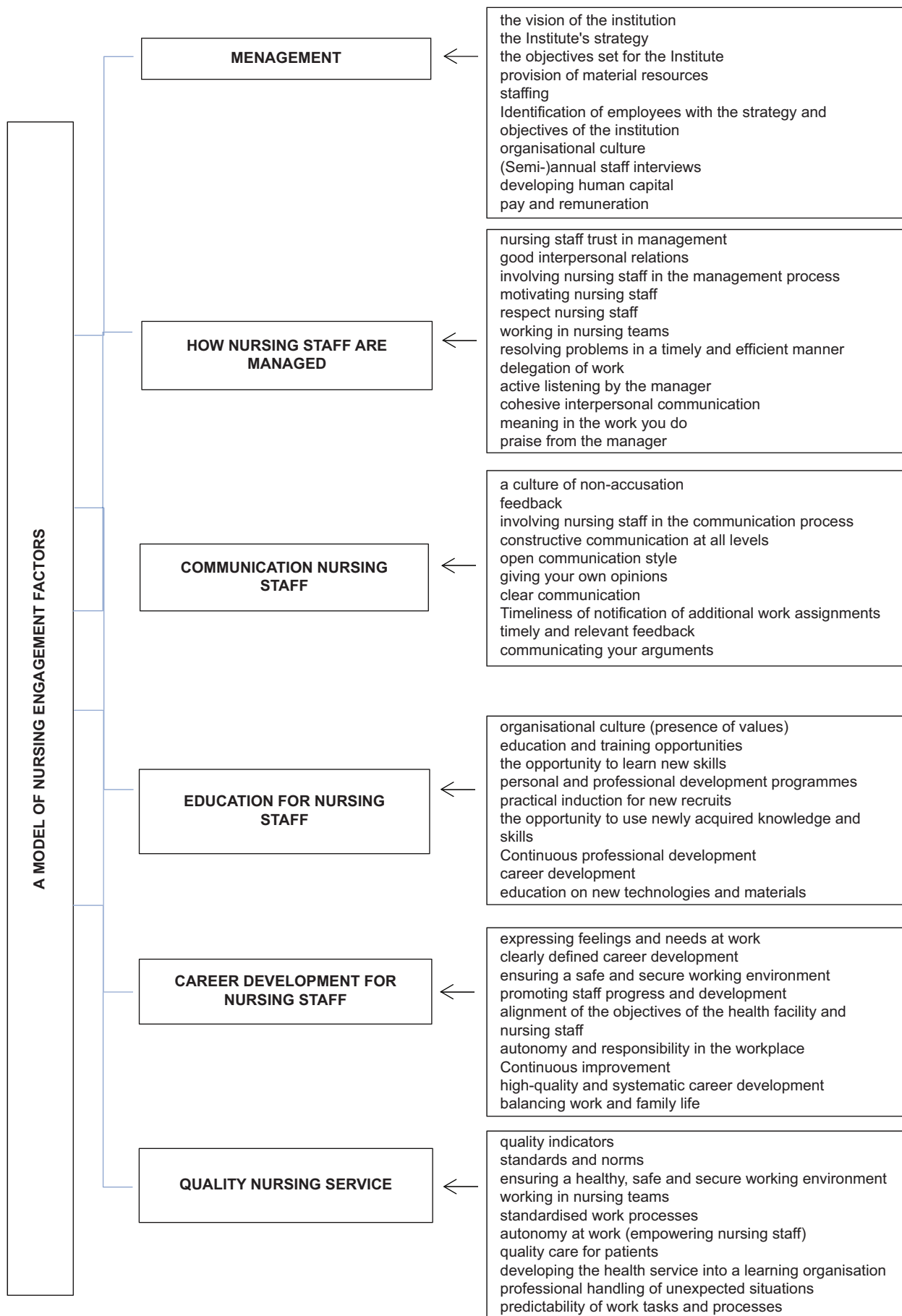


Figure 1: Theoretical model of the determinants of employee engagement in nursing care in Slovenia

with passion and feel a deep connection to the health-care facility where they are employed. They are a source of innovation at work and help to develop the nursing profession, trusting in their colleagues and leaders. Baron [50] notes that committed nursing staff are willing to go the extra mile, tend to communicate less negative information to management, and accept instructions from supervisors despite any doubt that they are best for them and their work team. Sirisetti [51] attributes nursing staff characteristics such as motivation and inspiration to work, interconnectedness, identification with the work, and concern for alignment with the goals of the work organization. Cataldo [43] attributes nursing staff characteristics such as motivation and inspiration to work, interconnectedness, identification with the work, and concern for alignment with the goals of the work organization. He also notes that all committed nursing staff share the following characteristics: They are respectful to patients and colleagues, they help colleagues, they are always willing to go the extra mile to improve the quality of care and patient satisfaction, they have a desire to do things better, they understand the context and see the “bigger picture” of the healthcare institution, they believe in it, and they are up-to-date in the development of the nursing profession.

Based on the analysis of original research and review articles, we developed a theoretical model of the determinants of employee engagement in nursing (Figure 1), which we grouped into six subcategories, namely: Management, leadership, communication, education, career development of employees, and quality of nursing service.

From the selected sub-categories, it can be assumed that nursing staff want to be involved in decision-making and management. Support from the work organization is important for them to achieve better engagement in the delivery of health and care services. It is important for nursing staff to feel that their work is important to the work organization, which should provide them with opportunities to express their full potential and talents. We recognize that without teamwork and mutual support, employees will find it difficult to be satisfied in the workplace. Only without rivalry can they leave room for getting to know each other and for close relationships that can lead to trust and better communication. To improve commitment in the work organization, communication is very important and must be two-way, clear and present in all directions of the work process. Employees are very much rewarded for a job well done. Employees' trust in the abilities of management to treat employees equally and fairly is also very important, as employees expect managers to provide good working conditions and opportunities for learning and growth in the workplace for all nursing staff so that they can be committed to providing quality nursing services. In doing so, management and leadership are committed to planned staff development.

Conclusion

The originality of this paper lies in its approach to the study of the determinants of employee engagement in nursing in healthcare institutions in Slovenia. Based on a comparative analysis of different models of engagement and a study of research and review articles, we formulated a theoretical model of nursing staff engagement factors that will be useful to managers in healthcare institutions as a basis for increasing nursing staff engagement.

After reviewing original research and review articles, we can conclude that the key problem in ensuring employee engagement in nursing and care in health-care settings is the lack of human resource management, staff shortages, employee disengagement, and the lack of sufficient numbers of qualified managers with management skills, lack of communication within the team, absence of strategic management and wasteful activities which, on the one hand, make it difficult for staff to work due to the lack of coordination between the different disciplines within the institutions and, on the other hand, consequently fail to provide quality services and accommodation to all care recipients. Nurse managers are thus often caught between a lack of managerial skills and pressure from the founder, nursing staff, and patients and their families to increase staff commitment and the quality of care.

Nurses are often the first people patients meet in a health-care facility. It is therefore important that nurses are kind, attentive, and empathetic toward patients. This can help reduce stress and anxiety in patients and improve patient satisfaction. They try to understand the needs of their patients and adapt to their individual needs. Committed nurses are more organized, more reliable, and more able to manage their time. This enables them to get more done in less time, increasing their efficiency and productivity. In addition, nurses can help improve patient satisfaction by providing quality nursing care. Dedicated nurses try to understand their patients' needs and adapt to their individual needs. This may include providing appropriate care, monitoring the patient's condition, and providing information about treatment. Finally, nurses can help improve patient satisfaction by ensuring appropriate communication.

Accordingly, it is important that management is aware of the importance of nurse and patient satisfaction and provides appropriate nursing staff engagement factors that promote satisfaction. These may be the most frequently mentioned in research (1) relationships between colleagues and supervisors (Positive relationships between colleagues and supervisors can help create a positive work environment that promotes nurse engagement.); (2) working conditions (appropriate equipment, sufficient time to do the job and proper organization of work); (3) career

development opportunities (training, education, and promotion to develop skills and knowledge, which can help to increase nurses' commitment and motivation); (4) opportunities for participation and involvement (participation and involvement in workplace decisions and processes, which can help nurses to feel more connected to the work environment and thus increase their engagement); (5) job security (nurses who feel safe and secure at work are often more engaged and motivated.); (6) use of best practices (Health-care professionals should use the best practices and guidelines available to provide the best possible care.); (7) recognition and rewards (to help encourage nurses to be more engagement and motivated, (8) an appropriate pay system (to reward nurses for their work and achievements, which can also help to encourage engagement and motivation); (9) strict compliance with standards and guidelines (helps to ensure that health care is delivered at the highest level of quality and efficiency); (10) commitment (Engagement nurses are very dedicated to their work and strive to provide the best possible health care for their patients.); (11) high levels of motivation (Engagement nurses are highly motivated and work hard to achieve their goals and improve the quality of care.); (12) positive attitude (Engagement nurses have a positive attitude towards their work and toward their colleagues, which helps to create a positive working environment.); (13) adaptability (Engagement nurses are able to adapt to different situations and try to find the best solutions to problems.); (14) ability to work under pressure (Engagement nurses are able to work under pressure and try to remain calm and collected even in stressful situations.), and (15) ability to work in a team (Engagement nurses are able to work in a team and try to work with colleagues and other health professionals to achieve common goals.).

Based on the theoretical model of nursing staff engagement according to results of 35 articles, we will be able to provide new scientific insights for improving nursing staff engagement in the future. Finally, the model can also serve as a basis for the development of new or redesign of existing nursing staff engagement questionnaires, the results of which can provide a qualitative indication of the level of nursing staff engagement and the possibility to analyze and improve the quality of those engagement factors that nursing staff would rate and perceive as less effective in their motivation to work and in the quality of their patient care. According to Furlani and Jevnikar [52], this is already relevant from the fact that existing questionnaires are designed to measure only the general dimension of work engagement (Utrecht Work Engagement Scale-17 and a shorter version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale-9), measuring only work burnout and work engagement. However, research has shown that the two concepts need to be separated, as work burnout is not the opposite of work engagement (Maslach Burnout Inventory Questionnaire

and Oldenburg Burnout Inventory Questionnaire), and the Gallup Questionnaire only includes 12 statements defining work engagement, and is based solely on meta-analyses of a number of focus groups and interviewees and has no theoretical background, the Society of Human Resource Management Survey has only 18 statements, the Impact of Events Scale has 12 statements, the Scarlett Johansson Questionnaire has 15 statements, the McKinsey 7SS Questions model has only seven factors, the Hewitt Employee Engagement model has 15 engagement indicators, the ISA (Intellectual, Socioceal, and Affective) Engagement Scale has nine indicators, which also prevents us from thoroughly and systematically exploring all the factors of nursing staff engagement in health-care settings identified in the original research and review articles analyzed.

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