

Healthy schedules, healthy nurses

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Use scheduling rules to promote nurse health.



FATIGUE IS COMMON among shift-work nurses, and longer shifts and overtime are associated with increased patient errors and undesirable nurse health outcomes. Consistent with the American Nurses Association's 2017 focus on the healthy nurse, one of the best ways for a workplace to promote nurse health is with its scheduling practices.

If we look to the aviation industry (as healthcare frequently does) to explore its scheduling practices, we find several regulations, including shift length limits based on when a shift begins in an attempt to be mindful of humans' circadian rhythms. At our organization, we've created and implemented several rules and metrics to guide our scheduling practices. Our goal is to achieve a healthy schedule that ensures safe patient care and promotes nurse health.

Metrics and rules

When creating schedules, our organization focuses on three important factors:

1. unhealthy shift patterns
2. weekend assignments
3. employee preferences.

The frequency of an unhealthy scheduling practice is converted to a metric so we can review the healthi-

ness of a given schedule. These metrics are translated to dashboards for comparison between units and over time. Each facility also can treat these as hard rules that don't permit a particular scheduling configuration.

Unhealthy shift patterns

In our organization, we avoid these five scheduling practices that can lead to unnecessary fatigue:

1. working more than three consecutive 12-hour shifts, four consecutive 10-hour shifts, or five consecutive 8-hour shifts
2. rotating shifts (from days to nights or vice versa) within the same 24-hour period
3. with the exception of 12-hour shifts, rotating shifts with less than twice the number of hours of a standard shift in between (for example, working an 8-hour evening shift, resting for 8 hours overnight, and returning for an 8-hour day shift is considered unhealthy)
4. excessive consecutive hours (for example, a 16-hour double shift)
5. overtime.

Weekend assignments

This scheduling rule aligns with unit and organizational policies for weekend requirements. The goal is to prevent any employee from working fewer weekend shifts than other employees, which might lead to perceptions of unfair scheduling.

Employee preferences

Because we assume employee satisfaction is associated with scheduling requests and preferences, we assess the proportion of employee requests and preferences that are honored in a given schedule. Converting this metric into a rule and permitting all employees' requests to be honored and still meet patient needs would be challenging. However, measuring the degree to which employee preferences aren't being honored helps us understand how well a schedule meets employee needs.

Employee participation in scheduling

Using the objective criteria described above and accompanying mathematical formulas (which can be modified to meet any organization's needs) allows for easy adoption into computerized scheduling programs that can be used in either manager-scheduled or self-scheduled frameworks.

Employee engagement in scheduling promotes struc-

tural empowerment and is an indicator of a healthy practice environment. In addition, sharing the workload of schedule creation with employees or scheduling centers can lead to healthier nurse managers. Delegating this time-consuming task may leave more time for managers to be present on the units.

Regardless of the degree to which managers and employees contribute to a unit's schedule, rules offer structured guidance that ensure the healthiest possible schedule is developed.

The present and future of scheduling

Moving toward a rule-based system that keeps nurses healthy may help enhance work-life balance, improve quality of care, and decrease fatigue and accompanying errors. Workforce researchers should consider exploring the influence of both scheduling rules and total work demands (for example, nurses working in multiple organizations) on empirical changes in nurse and patient outcomes. Studying these associations is essential to developing policies and regulations that keep our nation's nurses as healthy as possible.

Eliminating the negative effects of fatigue will require additional interventions, such as providing education to prevent fatigue, detecting fatigue, and creating systems that are fatigue-proof, but these may be signifi-

cantly more challenging to implement and enforce. As the healthcare profession develops these holistic approaches to fatigue management, improved scheduling practices can be implemented immediately, making them the first step toward reducing patient errors and improving nurse health. ★

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you don't fall behind on your workload. Make an objective assessment of your own self-discipline. Are you self-motivated? Do you know how to budget your time so that you can take care of all of your responsibilities (school, work, home)? If you need regular outside influence to stay on task, an online program may not be the best fit for you.

Clinical sites, preceptors, and immersions

Consider requirements for clinical hours, preceptors, and immersion experiences, particularly if you plan to enroll in a nurse practitioner program. Online programs typically require students to secure their own clinical sites and preceptors, both of which can be difficult to find. If you live in a rural area, you may have to travel several miles to complete clinical hours. Most on-campus programs, on the other hand, have arrangements with local

clinical sites and agreements with individuals to serve as preceptors.

You'll also want to factor in costs. Some sites and preceptors charge for their services, which usually are absorbed by institutions when participating in on-campus education but may not be covered by online programs. In addition, many online programs require students to attend immersion experiences, which may require travel to the institution's campus at least once per term or semester to interact face-to-face with faculty and demonstrate competencies. So, in addition to tuition and other fees, you'll need to factor in travel and lodging costs.

The best of both worlds

Some online programs feature asynchronous work coupled with once-per-week synchronous sessions, held via Skype, Adobe Connect, or some other similar platform. These programs bridge some gaps if you prefer the flexibility of online work

but still want to connect with others. The hybrid programs require you to be present at a particular day and time but still offer the flexibility of working on your own schedule.

Decision time

The decision to go back to school requires considering several factors, including the type of degree you want and the kind of program that best fits your needs and lifestyle, as well as costs, clinical placements, supervision, and travel. With all the options available today, this isn't a one-size-fits-all process, so you'll need to put in some time and work. Make a list of your wants and needs, then start looking for the program that's right for you. ★

Visit americannursetoday.com/education-on-campus-or-online for a list of selected references.

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