

Nurse fatigue: A shared responsibility

By Ruth Francis, MPH, MCHES

RNs and employers can work together to promote healthy sleep.

GETTING ADEQUATE REST is important for everyone, especially when fewer daylight hours in the fall and winter may contribute to fatigue. According to the National Sleep Foundation, the recommended amount of sleep for adults is 7 to 9 hours a night. However, nurses responding to the American Nurses Association's (ANA) Health Risk Appraisal (HRA) averaged about 7 hours, after working more than 10 hours a day, according to a 2016 executive summary.

Healthy sleep is important

Working long shifts is a reality for many RNs, which is why the benefits of healthy sleep are so vital. According to ANA, these benefits include heightened alertness, boosted mood, increased energy, enhanced concentration, more stamina, greater motivation, better judgment, and improved learning. Conversely, those who are sleep-deprived are susceptible to obesity, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, and mood disorders, according to the National Institutes of Health. Errors can occur if nurses aren't energized, alert, and focused.

RN recommendations

Recognizing the challenges that RNs face to reduce the risk of nurse fatigue, ANA developed the position statement, *Addressing Nurse Fatigue to Promote Safety and Health: Joint Responsibilities of Registered Nurses and Employers to Reduce Risks*. Recommendations include:

- Get regular and restful sleep.
- Improve overall personal health and wellness.
- Take scheduled meals and breaks.
- Use related benefits and employee services, such as “resting rooms,” workout facilities, or guaranteed ride home.
- Follow established policies and use reporting systems for reporting accidents and near misses.
- Be aware of side effects of over-the-counter and prescription medications.

Employer responsibilities

For employers, adequate provisions should be made for RNs who are fatigued at the end of their shifts, rather than allowing them to drive home. In the 2016 ANA HRA, 12% of respondents reported that they had nodded off while driving in the past month. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that “lack of sleep can make you less alert and affect your coordination, judgment, and reaction time while driving”—the equivalent of driving drunk. Other recommendations for employers include:

- managing staff without mandatory overtime
- allowing RNs to accept or reject work assignments
- instituting anonymous reporting systems for errors and near-misses
- designing schedules using evidence-based recommendations
- providing fatigue-management training and education for employees and managers.

Since releasing the fatigue position statement in 2015, ANA has received mixed responses. Although nurses might benefit from recommended shorter workdays to catch up on sleep, they prefer longer shifts that enable them to work fewer days—so they can take a second job, continue their education, or spend time with their families—but may result in more fatigue. For employers, managing staffing levels while supporting RN needs is still a challenge.

Commit to health

To assist nurses and employers, ANA implemented Healthy Nurse, Healthy Nation™, a social movement that engages nurses and organizations in their commitment to better health. One of the domains, or focus areas, is “rest.” Through blogs, events, education, and frequent challenges, the plan is to mobilize nurses to actively take care of their own health needs.

Recognizing and addressing nurse fatigue should be everyone's responsibility. Don't wait for an error, accident, or fatality to occur before taking precautions. ★

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