Occupational health and safety for nurses

The working environment of healthcare workers is considered to be one of the most hazardous occupational settings and nurses are often exposed to health hazards. Safe work environments in the health sector are essential to deliver quality care, support positive patient outcomes and individual nurse wellbeing and contribute to workforce strengthening.

Occupational health encompasses "…the anticipation, evaluation and control of hazards arising in or from the workplace that could impair the health and well-being of workers, taking into account the possible impact on the surrounding communities and the general environment" (1).

Hazards found in the healthcare environment include biological (HIV, TB, Hepatitis), chemical, ergonomic (overexertion, falls, lifting), physical (radiation, sharps) and psychological (shift work, excessive workloads, violence, stress) hazards. The likelihood of exposure to these hazards is often increased by inadequate access to protective devices and safe equipment, increased demands for nursing and healthcare, poor ergonomics, and inappropriate staffing and shift patterns. Needle-stick and sharp injuries, musculoskeletal injuries, communicable diseases and workplace violence have been the most prevalent nursing workplace hazards in both developed and developing countries (2-4).

Nurses who work in community settings, especially in rural and remote areas, are at an even higher risk of experiencing occupational health hazards because they often travel large distances to clients' homes, work in isolation for long periods, and work without adequate breaks. Furthermore, clients' homes may be unsafe for nurses to provide adequate care and violence towards nurses from clients or their family members is a great concern (5).

Occupational injuries and illnesses increase psychological distress and job dissatisfaction often leading to increased turnover which further aggravates the nursing shortage and exacerbates nursing workforce issues (6, 7).

In certain countries, there is no occupational health and safety legislation for the healthcare sector. In others, the meant to monitor its implementation and the machinery to discipline the offending employers is ineffective or non-existent. Additionally, most governments fail to regularly collect data on the incidence of accidents, injuries and illness of nursing personnel and other healthcare workers as the basis for sound policy formulation. Where data is collected regularly, underreporting of nurse injury is one of the barriers in collecting accurate data based on voluntary injury reports.

Ensuring access to adequate protective devices and equipment is a responsibility for employers in preventing occupational hazards. However, these devices and equipment are not universally available nor fully utilised by nurses even when adequate provisions are in place increasing the risk of occupational health hazards (8, 9). Positive practice environments, with adequate number of staffing and workload, managerial support, and high quality leadership, are significantly associated with decreased occupational health outcomes injuries and illnesses (10).

ICN Position & Recommendations

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) believes that every nurse has the right to work in a healthy and safe environment without risk of injury or illness resulting from that work and that employers across the healthcare continuum have an ethical, moral, and legal responsibility to create these environments.

ICN promotes the development and application of international, national and local policies or instruments that will safeguard the nurses' right to a safe work environment, including continuing education, immunisation and protective clothing/equipment. ICN

reconfirms its mandate to encourage research in this area and to circulate relevant information on a regular basis to appropriate stakeholders.

ICN deplores the lack of appropriate national occupational health and safety legislation covering nurses and other healthcare workers, the inadequate mechanisms for workers' participation in monitoring of and eliminating occupational hazards and the insufficient resources allocated to ensure optimal occupational health and safety services and labour inspection.

ICN supports the expanding role of nurses in occupational health, infection prevention and control, and health and safety roles, and adequate career structures that support professional development in these areas. ICN calls for the recognition of occupational health and safety as a professional nursing role with the appropriate remuneration that corresponds to the level of expertise and incentives to attract/retain nurses in this area of practice.

ICN recognises that older persons are considered to be at particular risk to occupational illness and injury and with an ageing workforce, believes that particular attention should be paid to this group of workers (1).

ICN strongly supports the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Constitution and the supporting Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No.155) that sets out the principle that all workers should be protected from sickness, disease and injury arising from their employment (11). ICN believes that all healthcare stakeholders including national nurses associations (NNAs), employers, nurses and other healthcare professionals, nursing professional and regulatory organizations, labour unions, national and local governments, and nurse educators and researchers, have a responsibility to actively promote a safe work environment in the health sector:

NNAs (or Nursing professional and regulatory organizations and Labour unions) should:

- Urge their respective governments to ensure that all health agencies fall within the provision of occupational health and safety legislation.

- Initiate and/or support research in their countries on safety and suitability of the work environment of nurses as well as risk behaviours, attitudes, procedures and activities.

- Urge ministries of health to adopt and implement all necessary measures to safeguard the health and wellbeing of nurses including ensuring the availability of appropriate protective equipment.

- Raise awareness among nurses, employers and the public of occupational hazards in the health sector, including violence and abuse.

- Raise nurses' awareness of their rights (as workers) to a safe environment and of their obligations to protect their safety and promote the safety of others.

- Cooperate with appropriate authorities to ensure the accuracy of the List of Occupational Diseases and periodically evaluate its relevance to nursing personnel.

- Support nurses' claims for compensation in relation to occupational disease and/or injury.

- Obtain and disseminate information on the incidence of work-related accidents, injuries and illnesses of nurses.

- Cooperate with other organisations supporting the worker's right to a safe work environment.

- Call for adequate monitoring systems at all levels that will ensure appropriate implementation of policies.

- Increase collaboration between ministries of health and labour to address occupational health and safety issues in healthcare settings.

For Governments

- Disseminate information on non-compliance by employers of occupational health and safety legislation, including reporting mechanisms for such violations.

- Obtain and disseminate the data on the incidence of work-related accidents, injuries and illnesses of nurses.
- Provide appropriate information and new directives on occupational health hazards.
- Ensure adequate investments in healthcare to support safe working environments and to maintain adequate numbers and appropriate skill mix of healthcare workers.

For Employers

- Comply with legislation, relevant guidelines, and new directives on occupational health and safety.
- Develop and implement policies and programmes to identify occupational health hazards and to prevent work-related accidents, injuries, and illnesses.
- Assess current policies and risk management procedures for their effectiveness on a regular basis.
- Collaborate with healthcare workers and other staff to carry out systematic and proactive workplace risk assessments.
- Introduce and implement safety measures and provide workers with adequate training where indicated by risk assessments.
- Ensure the access of healthcare workers to protective measures and equipment at no cost to the staff member.
- Encourage nurses to undergo medical examinations, vaccinations and treatment (TB, HIV, diabetes mellitus, etc.) relevant to their health and safety in the workplace.
- Create or facilitate user-friendly, confidential and effective reporting mechanisms.
- Facilitate educational training on prevention and management of occupational hazards.

Nurses and other healthcare workers should:

- Formally report any incidents of work-related accidents, injuries, and/ illnesses.
- Be aware of risks and hazards in the workplace and follow appropriate procedures to ensure safe and protect their health.
- Undergo routine medical examination and vaccination against infection diseases relevant to their work.

- Participate in educational training on prevention and management of occupational hazards

- Participate in health and safety committees and activities to improve safety at the workplace, including the occupational health committee.

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