Nurses: from voluntary resignations to strategies to reduce escape

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ABSTRACT

Background: *Voluntary resignations among nursing staff represent a significant phenomenon that global healthcare systems have been facing in recent decades. While resignations are expected in any profession, the increasing rate of nurse turnover significantly affects continuity of care and service quality. Studies show that approximately 30% of nurses leave the profession within the first five years of their careers, a rate that has increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which, by raising stress levels, has further driven resignations.*

Objectives: *This descriptive study aims to examine the causes of voluntary nurse resignations, focusing on the impact of workplace policies and organizational conditions on retention. The study will provide a clearer understanding of the factors driving voluntary resignations and suggest potential solutions to im-prove job satisfaction and reduce early career turnover.*

Methods: *This study employs a systematic literature review methodology, analyzing existing research on nurse resignations. The objective is to synthesize the causes, impacts, and proposed solutions to address the phenomenon. Studies published over the past 13 years, including both quantitative and qualitative re-search, will be considered.*

Results: *The primary causes of voluntary resignations include burnout, high stress levels, inadequate working conditions, and a lack of career advancement opportunities. Additionally, organizational factors such as inadequate leadership and insufficient support systems also contribute significantly. As a result, these resignations extend beyond the individual nurse, affecting hospital costs, care quality, and team morale.*

Conclusions: *Voluntary nurse resignations pose a growing threat to healthcare systems, with profound impacts on service quality and sustainability. Improving working conditions, offering career development opportunities, and providing organizational support are fundamental steps in addressing this issue. The study's findings suggest that strategies aimed at enhancing job satisfaction and reducing burnout are es-sential to encourage nurse retention.*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of voluntary resignations among nursing staff has emerged as one of the major challenges facing global healthcare systems in recent decades. While voluntary resignations are expected in any profession, when they occur among nurses, who are indispensable for the func-tioning of heal-thcare systems, they raise significant concerns regarding continuity of care and service quality. Statistics indicate that the nursing turnover rate is steadily increasing, with nearly 30% of nurses leaving the profession within the first five years of their careers [1]. This phe-nomenon has been further exacerba-ted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has intensi-fied the psychological, physical, and emotional stress experienced by nurses, prompting them to leave the healthcare sector [2]. A survey conducted between November and December 2024 by the Provincial Order of Nursing Professions of Trento on a sample of 1,099 nurses revealed that 21.4% of respondents intended to voluntarily leave their organization or the profession within the following year: speci-fically, 16.2% intended to leave their organization, while 5.2% planned to leave the nursing profession altogether.

The reasons behind voluntary resignations are com-plex and vary depending on work environ-ments, local healthcare policies, and individual experiences. The most common causes include high levels of oc-cupational stress, challenging working conditions, staff shortages, and excessive workloads. All these factors contribute to decreased job satisfaction [3]. Additional factors in-clude limited career advance-ment opportunities, difficulties balancing work and personal life, and a perceived lack of recognition for the value of nursing work [4]. Moreover, other stu-dies suggest that organizational dynamics and sup-port from healthcare institutions play a crucial role in determining nurses' retention in their roles [5].

This descriptive study aims to thoroughly explore the causes of voluntary nurse resignations, with the objective of outlining a clearer picture of the moti-vations and circumstances that drive pro-fessionals to leave the profession. Additionally, the study will focus on how workplace policies and organizatio-nal conditions influence nurse retention, proposing potential solutions to improve job satisfaction and reduce early career attrition.

The contribution of this study aligns with the growing awareness of the need for effective stra-te-gies to improve nurse retention and, conse-quently, ensure quality care and the sustainability

of healthcare systems. The conclusions of this study may provide valuable insights for local healthcare policies, suggesting targeted interventions to support the nursing profession and im-prove working conditions.

METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

This study aims to conduct a systematic review of the existing scientific literature to explore and understand the phenomenon of voluntary nurse resignations. The primary objective is to collect, analyze, and critically reflect on published studies to provide a synthesis of the causes, conse-quences, and proposed solutions for addressing the phenomenon. This study does not intend to collect new primary data but will focus on analyzing existing research, with particular attention to the quality and implications of the available evidence. The objectives of this study are:

- To collect and synthesize scientific articles addressing voluntary nurse resignations, exam-ining the causes, impacts, and proposed solutions.
- To review existing theories and models in the literature that explain the factors influencing voluntary resignations.
- To identify major gaps in research and areas that remain underexplored.
- To provide critical reflections on the approaches and policies proposed in the literature to reduce nurse turnover and improve retention.

This study adopts a systematic literature review methodology. A systematic review aims to gather and synthesize all available evidence on the research topic to provide a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon. The research will cover articles published over the past thirteen years and will include studies utilizing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approaches.

This systematic literature review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines. The se-arch was conducted on PubMed, Scopus, CINAHL and Google Scholar. The keywords used, combined with Boolean operators (AND/OR), were: "voluntary resignation of nurses", "nurse turnover", "nurse retention", "nurse job satisfaction", "causes of nurse attrition", "impact of nurse resignation".

Inclusion Criteria: Articles published from 2013 to 2025. Quantitative, qualitative, mixed studies and literature reviews. Language: English and Italian.

Exclusion Criteria: Unpublished theses, company reports, non-peer-reviewed articles. Studies not relevant or focused only on single departments wi-thout general analysis. Articles prior to 2013 or in languages other than English/Italian.

Study Selection

The search identified a total of 212 articles. Duplicates removed: 42. Articles excluded after reading title/abstract: 140. Articles included in the final review: 30. Last Search Date: April 2025. For each article the following was collected: Author(s), year, type of study, main results, limita-tions declared or observed. The data were summarized through thematic analysis (table 1).

Table 1

Author (Year)	Method	Main Results	Limits
Dyrbye et al. (2020)	Cross-sectional study	50% burnout among U.S. nurses	Response bias
Poghosyan et al. (2020)	Systematic review	Poor support increases turnover	Heterogeneous contexts
Flinkman et al. (2020)	Integrative review	43% report lack of care-er opportunities	Geographical limitations
Laschinger et al. (2022)	Longitudinal study	Culture and recognition are key	Limited sample
Shields et al. (2022)	Observational study	Collaborative environ-ment is effective	Subjective measurement
Li et al. (2021)	Mixed-methods study	Training improves retention	Unique context
Cummings et al. (2021)	Qualitative study	Positive leadership in-creases satisfaction	Self-assessment
Hurst et al. (2022)	Systematic review	Incentives reduce tur-nover	Economic variability

Heinen et al. (2013)	Multicenter study	Institutional support is important	Cross-sectional design
De Villiers et al. (2020)	Mixed-methods study	Stress and workload impact nurses	Small sample size
Maslach et al. (2021)	Theoretical study	Burnout is a multifactorial concept	Theoretical generalization
Aiken et al. (2020)	Systematic review	Turnover linked to patient outcomes	Methodological variability
McHugh et al. (2022)	Observational study	Stress and overload = resignation	Observational design
Stone et al. (2021)	Descriptive study	COVID increased resignations	Temporal factors
OPI Trento (2025)	Regional survey	21.4% intention to leave	Localized sample
Galletta et al. (2020)	Longitudinal study	Burnout affects other healthcare workers	Temporal limitations
Galletta et al. (2021)	Cross-sectional study	Turnover increases burden on others	Self-assessments
Buchan et al. (2021)	Health policy review	Replacing nurses is very costly	Estimated economic limits
Buchan et al. (2019)	WHO study	30% leave within the first 5 years	Global monitoring limitations
Liu et al. (2020)	Observational study	Work environment influences patient safety	Non-causal associations
Laschinger & Finegan (2014)	Quantitative study	Working conditions reduce satisfaction	Cross-sectional design
Leiter et al. (2021)	Longitudinal study	Managerial support = retention	Niche sample
Sloane et al. (2020)	Cross-sectional study	Poor conditions = high turnover	Representativeness
Jordan et al. (2020)	Secondary analysis	High turnover linked to costs	Economic data limitations
Bryant et al. (2021)	Observational study	Pandemic impacts motivation	Limited duration
Roberts et al. (2020)	Qualitative study	Lack of professional recognition	Small sample
Wilkins et al. (2022)	Mixed-methods study	Work-life balance is essential	Variability in perceptions
Aiken, Clarke & Sloane (2020)	Multicenter study	Understaffing = errors	Systemic bias
Leino-Kilpi et al. (2020)	Qualitative study	Clinical autonomy reduces turnover	Cultural limitations
Salanterä et al. (2020)	Longitudinal study	Career paths motivate retention	Partial analysis

DATA EXTRACTION AND ANALYSIS

The data will be systematically extracted from each selected article and compiled into a matrix containing the following information:

• Bibliographic data: Authors, year of publication.
• Causes of voluntary resignations: A synthesis of the main motivations for nurses resigning, such as work stress, lack of career advancement opportunities, workload, organizational condi-tions, etc.
• Impacts of nurse turnover: The effects of turnover on the healthcare system, quality of care, and nurses' well-being.
• Proposed solutions: Strategies and policies suggested to reduce turnover and improve re-tention, including organizational policy changes, workplace condition improvements, professional support programs, etc.

Once extracted, the data will be synthesized in a thematic analysis, focusing on emerging trends and approaches that could be adopted to effectively address the issue of voluntary nurse resig-nations.

The results will be summarized based on the main themes identified during the analysis, includ-ing: the primary causes of voluntary nurse resignations, such as stress, working conditions, and work environment management, the direct and indirect consequences for hospitals, the healthcare system, and patients, the solutions proposed in the literature, including organizational and cultural interventions, research gaps and inadequately explored issues.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of scientific literature on the issue of voluntary nurse resignations has provided a comprehensive view of the causes, consequences, and proposed solutions to improve nurse re-tention. The findings reveal common trends as well as variability based on geographical and or-ganizational contexts.

1. Causes of Voluntary Resignations

Voluntary nurse resignations are a complex phenomenon influenced by organizational, psycho-logical, and social factors. The main reasons identified in the literature include burnout and Work-Related Stress: Burnout is one of the most documented causes. A study by Dyrbye et al. [6] found that 50% of nurses in the United States feel "highly stressed" or "burned out" due to working conditions. Burnout has been linked to low job satisfaction and increased turnover [7]. Staffing shortages and excessive workloads are key factors in resignations. Poghosyan et al. [8] highlighted that 60% of nurses in public hospitals do not feel supported by colleagues or man-agement, increasing the desire to leave their job. The lack of professional growth opportunities is another recur-ring factor. Flinkman et al. [9] found that 43% of nurses in healthcare facilities do not have adequate advancement opportunities.

Cultural and Social Factors: Cultural influences and socio-economic context are equally crucial. Laschin-ger et al. [3] suggested that organizational culture, insufficient professional recognition, and difficulty balancing work and family life push nurses to lea-ve, particularly in intensive care units. Many nurses report dissatisfaction with their salary levels and be-nefits, contributing to their decision to leave their organization or profession [10]. Limited advance-ment possibilities and the lack of individual merit recognition reduce motivation and increase the risk of voluntary resignations [10]. Excessive bureau-cracy and non-nursing tasks reduce patient care time, leading to frustration as well as low Involve-ment in Decision-Making Processes. Nurses often do not feel heard or involved in organizational de-cisions, negatively impacting job satisfaction [10]. Low En-gagement and Motivation Levels: A weak sense of belonging and motivation toward the orga-niza-tion often influence the decision to leave, that together with the lack of flexible shift models and high workloads compromise nurses' physical and mental well-being [10].

2. Consequences of Voluntary Resignations

Voluntary resignations not only affect individual nurses but also the entire healthcare system, with negative effects on care quality and the sustainabi-lity of healthcare institutions. Resignations result in high financial costs associated with recruiting and training new employees. Buchan et al. [11] estimate that the cost of replacing a hospital nurse ranges from $30,000 to $60,000. High nursing staff tur-nover compromises care quality. Aiken et al. [12] documented that hospitals with high nurse turnover rates have increased risks of medical errors and ho-spital-acquired infec-tions. Psychological Effects on Remaining Staff: Turnover also impacts the nurses who stay. Gal-letta et al. [13] observed that burnout and frustration among remaining staff stem from workload overload caused by staffing shortages.

3. Strategies for Nurse Retention

Several studies suggest approaches to reducing tur-nover and improving nurse retention. The most ef-fective strategies include improving Working Con-ditions, Shields et al. [14] suggest that improving working conditions, reducing unpaid overtime, and promoting a collaborative envi-ronment can lower turnover rates. Li et al. [15] state that nurses who participate in training pro-grams and perceive real career opportunities are more motivated to stay in the profession. Posi-tive leadership that promotes engagement and recognition is crucial to improving job satisfaction and reducing turnover [16], com-petitive salary policies and performance incentive programs reduce turnover [17], ensuring salaries appropriate to the level of responsibility and reco-gnizing nurses' contributions financially [10], in-troducing personalized work schedules to improve work-life balance and reduce stress with a clear legal

and economic framework that ensuring that responsibilities are formally recognized and adequately compensated, along with the introducing "clinical secretary" roles to delegate administrative and bureaucratic tasks to appropriate per-sonnel and create an organizational culture in which nurses feel motivated and recognized for their contribution to care quality [10].

Participation in Decision-Making Processes: Encouraging a work environment where nurses can voice opinions and actively contribute to improving healthcare services. Structured Career De-velopment Plans: Establishing clear and well-defined career paths to encourage retention in the sector.

4. Gaps in Literature and Areas for Future Research

Despite significant advancements, gaps in the literature still exist. Many studies are cross-sectional and do not examine the evolution of resignations over time. The reviewed studies cover countries with different healthcare systems, necessitating further research to understand the influence of national healthcare policies. This study presents also some limitations: the re-view will rely exclusively on published studies, which may not reflect all existing experiences or data. The selection is limited to the past 13 years, excluding potentially relevant contributions from earlier research. The selected studies originate from different contexts (countries, healthcare systems), which may limit the generalizability of the results.

CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of voluntary nurse resignations represents a growing challenge for healthcare systems, with significant consequences for care quality and the sustainability of healthcare insti-tutions. In line with the introduction, the findings of this study highlight that burnout, difficult working conditions, excessive workloads, and a lack of professional ad-

vancement opportunities are among the primary reasons driving nurses to leave the profession. The increasing incidence of voluntary resignations, as indicated in recent surveys, underscores the severity of the phe-nomenon and the urgency of addressing it. The implications of voluntary resignations extend beyond individual nurses, deeply impacting the healthcare system as a whole by increasing personnel replacement costs, reducing care quality, and compromising the well-being of remaining nurses. Studies conducted in the Province of Trento confirm that a significant number of nurses intend to leave their organization or profes-sion, reinforcing the study's findings on the correlation between stress, lack of support, and job dissatisfaction. To address this emergency, the evidence suggests the need for an integrated ap-proach, including improvements in working conditions, promotion of continuous education, and the provision of career development opportunities. Additionally, the introduction of psycho-logi-cal support policies, flexible shift models, and financial incentives are strategic interventions that can help reduce nurse turnover. A focus on positive leadership that encourages nurse participa-tion in decision-making processes and recognizes their value is essential for improving retention.

However, despite the extensive available literature, some significant gaps remain, such as the need for longitudinal studies and a more in-depth analysis of dynamics across different national contexts. These gaps represent an important opportunity for future research, which could pro-vide even more precise data to guide more targeted and effective retention policies.

In conclusion, reducing voluntary nurse resignations requires a multidimensional intervention that considers working conditions, organizational management, and institutional support. Only through a comprehensive approach will it be possible to ensure care quality and the long-term sustainability of healthcare systems.

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