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Re-Envisioning Nurse Engagement and Retention with Professional Advancement Models

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Abstract

Background: In the late 1960s, it was recognized that there were differences in the professional practice of nurses based on the type of educational program completed. This prompted hospital professional development programs to explore ways to close knowledge gaps between graduates of different program levels, advance professional nurse practice, and encourage growth as clinical leaders. Later, goals of nursing career development programs of the early 1970s were to deepen engagement of staff nurses, create exciting career opportunities, and improve bedside competence. These goals were supported by hospitals and professional advancement models began to be integrated into nursing practice. It was anticipated that through participation in such models nurses would demonstrate improved satisfaction while continuing to work in a clinical capacity. Hospitals would benefit with increased retention of bedside nurses and the cost savings associated with a stable workforce. Today, Professional Advancement Models (PAMs), also known as Clinical Ladders or Clinical Career Pathways, are formal frameworks utilized in healthcare systems to support quality in nursing practice while rewarding nurses for advancement in skill and commitment to practice. Participation in PAMs has shown to improve nurse satisfaction and retention by increasing feelings of autonomy and hospital engagement. Unfortunately, not all nurses desire to participate in PAMs with many passing on this apparent opportunity to become more formally engaged in their professional roles. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the critical need for strategies to improve bedside nurse retention.

Objectives: As an established method to increase nurse retention, PAMs can be re-envisioned as an approach to meet the increased need of retaining clinical staff. The purpose of this literature review was to identify recent PAM structures and processes, and the effects and barriers of those models.

Methods: A literature search was conducted using University's global database. The following search terms were used: clinical ladder, professional development and nurse retention, professional advancement model, nursing, and nurse retention. Search criteria included articles published from 2018 through the present, English language, and full text available. Articles included for review pertained to bedside nurses; and, articles excluded were those relating to advanced practice nurses. Four articles met the search criteria and were reviewed for an organizational project. Common themes discussed included effect on staff nurse retention and engagement, PAM advancement requirements, and barriers to PAM use by staff nurses.

Conclusion: Professional Advancement Models are an effective way to improve nurse engagement, satisfaction, and retention. It is not adequate to merely establish PAMs within organizations; nurse engagement with PAMs is essential to obtain the desired outcome of nurse retention. However, lack of streamlined, easily understood professional advancement processes, time required to complete the application, and absence of support by nurse leaders have led to lack of nurse engagement with PAMs. Recommendations will be offered that simplify and streamline the application process and offer suggestions for nurse leadership with a primary goal to increase engagement, ultimately promoting nurse satisfaction and retention.