Turnover among Filipino nurses in Ministry of Health hospitals in Saudi Arabia: causes and recommendations for improvement

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BACKGROUND: Nurse turnover is a critical challenge for healthcare organizations as it results in a decreasing nurse/patient ratio and increasing costs.

AIM: Identify factors influencing the termination of Filipino nurses in Ministry of Health (MOH) hospitals and record nurse recommendations to improve retention.

DESIGN: Cross-sectional.

METHODS: Data was gathered from a convenience sample of Filipino nurses with previous experience in MOH hospitals in Saudi Arabia who attended recruitment interviews at the Saudi employment office in Manila.

RESULTS: The sample included 124 nurses. Major turnover factors included low salary (18.3%), low nurse/patient ratio (15%), end of contract (14.5%), discrimination (13.5%), and bad accommodations (9%). Suggested areas of improvement included financial motivations (34%), administration support (25%), quality of life (25%), and work environment (16%).

CONCLUSION: Managing nurse turnover can be implemented on the organizational as well as at MOH levels. The recommendations given by the participants provide direct targets to improve retention.

LIMITATIONS: With convenience sampling, the sample is probably not representative of the Filipino nursing population.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: None.
searcher used nurse retention factors identified in previous studies as a framework to cluster the responses of the participants around the main themes. Approval to conduct the study was granted by the Saudi Employment Office in Manila and the Philippine Office of Employment. Since no personal data or any identifying information were gathered, verbal consent and acceptance to take part in the study by the participants satisfied the ethical requirement to conduct the study.

RESULTS
Of 63 invited, 142 agreed to participate (87%) (Table 1). Low salary and low nurse:patient ratio were the most common reasons for leaving employment (Figure 1). The study participants suggested numerous improvements that were classified into four dimensions: financial motivations (34%), administration support (25%), quality of life (25%), and work environment (16%) (Table 2).

DISCUSSION
The top cause of turnover was low salary (18.3%). Financial incentives are a major driving force for nurses working in international organizations. Despite the nurses being aware of their salary before signing the contract with MOH, actual salary may vary due to differences in financial incentives between remote hospitals, general hospitals and medical cities, and overtime in medical cities and tertiary hospitals. Moreover, nurses

Table 1. Demographic characteristic of the study sample (n=124).

| Demographic characteristic          | n   | %   |
|-------------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Age (years)                         |     |     |
| <30                                 | 65  | 52.4|
| 30-40                               | 52  | 41.9|
| >40                                 | 7   | 5.6 |
| Length of service in Saudi Arabia (years) |     |     |
| 1-3                                 | 62  | 50  |
| 4-6                                 | 39  | 31.4|
| >6                                  | 23  | 18.5|
| Work settings                       |     |     |
| Hospitals                           | 100 | 80.6|
| Primary health care                 | 24  | 19.4|

Table 2. Recommendations to improve the turnover rate.

|                                | n   | %   |
|--------------------------------|-----|-----|
| **Financial**                  |     |     |
| Increase salary                | 59  | 24.6|
| Add financial benefits         | 22  | 9.2 |
| **Administration support**     |     |     |
| Stop discrimination            | 26  | 10.8|
| Transparency in policy         | 11  | 4.6 |
| Standard appraisal/credentialing| 9   | 3.7 |
| **Quality of life**            |     |     |
| Improve accommodations         | 37  | 15.4|
| Increase holidays and day-off  | 15  | 6.2 |
| Appreciation                   | 5   | 2.0 |
| Assure safety                  | 3   | 1.2 |
| **Work environment**           |     |     |
| Minimize understaffing         | 35  | 14.6|
| Decrease paperwork             | 1   | 0.4 |
| Utilize temporary staff        | 2   | 0.8 |

Figure 1. Reasons for turnover.
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who work in small and remote hospitals or primary healthcare are affected by low staff numbers, and are consequently susceptible to low nurse/patient ratio (15%). Financial motivations include an increase in wages and financial benefits. Due to a shortage of staff, increased workload, and emergency situations, hospitals have to ask nurses to work for extra hours. The accredited hours are accumulated as extra-offs, but the nurses are rarely allowed to use their extra-off days during a shortage crisis. If nurses are unable to enjoy their extra-off days either financially or by having more holidays, they may experience job dissatisfaction and burnout, which may result in turnover.

Improving the work environment is an applicable strategy on the organizational level. Participants mentioned three recommendations: minimize understaffing, decrease paperwork, and use temporary staff. Other recommendations could be attained by adopting a mixed approach to nursing skills where simple nursing skills are delegated to nurse assistants and allied health professionals. Evidence-based human resource management has been reported to have positive organizational outcomes. More important, is support of nurse transfers between healthcare organizations within the health sectors.

In conclusion, the Saudi healthcare systems especially MOH, are facing significant challenges and transformations. These challenges can be navigated by addressing the needs of the nurses who represent the majority of the entire healthcare workforce in the country. The study identified the causes of turnover and recommendations to improve retention by the affected segment of nursing personnel. Approaches to manage these challenges are applicable on the organizational and MOH levels. Health planners may utilize further approaches to predict the nursing workforce stability, which is crucial to healthcare system transformation. The primary limitation of the study was the convenience sample, which limits generalizability.

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