



Influence of Career Growth on Retention of Nurses In Public Primary Health Facilities in Lilongwe District, Malawi

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Abstract

Introduction: Retention of nurses is a very big challenge all over the world, especially in Africa. Malawi too is no exception, particularly Lilongwe District, despite the efforts of the government to provide good working condition for health workers. The broad objective of this study was to determine how career growth influences retention of nurses in public primary health facilities in Lilongwe District. The specific objectives were to establish the influence of training and promotion on the retention of nurses in public primary health facilities. **Methods:** A descriptive cross-sectional study design was used with quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect data. The study included 130 nurses and five principal nursing officers from five public primary health facilities in Lilongwe District in Malawi. Only the five public primary health facilities with the highest patient volume were included in the study sample. Census was used to determine the study sample. Data was collected using structured questionnaire and a key informant Interview guide. Quantitative data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science software version 23. **Results:** The study established that training and promotion influences retention of nurses in primary public health facilities in Lilongwe District. The bivariate linear correlation analysis indicated a significant positive influence of training on nurses retention ($r = .691, P < 0.001$), and a significant positive influence of promotion on retention of nurses ($r = .719, P < 0.001$). Results from multiple regression analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between career growth and nurses retention. Overall, promotion at work place had more influence on nurses' retention in primary health facilities. **Conclusion:** The study recommends that managers in public primary health facilities enforce health quality management policy to promote training and upgrading of nurses. In addition, managers in primary public health facilities should provide career growth opportunities for nurses through on job training and promotions.

Keywords: Retention, Career growth, primary public health facilities, Lilongwe, Malawi

Introduction

Globally, retention of nurses is a very big challenge and to retain experienced employees is not only cost effective, but of great importance in promoting performance of nursing services in health care organizations (Chris, 2009). Furthermore retention helps to have an adequate nursing work force supply for the present and the future, to achieve equitable and quality health outcomes and consumer access to healthcare regardless of the geographical location. Shortage of nurses, particularly in the acute care settings in hospitals, endangers the provision of quality health care to individuals. The international shortage of nurses which result from global under supply and attrition rates affects developed countries in the West the same way it does the developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Heathfield J. and John M., 2009).

In Africa, retention of nurses remains a challenge and innocent individual have lost their lives due to lack of skilled and highly qualified nurses in health facilities. Availability of health personnel is considered worse in Africa than other regions of the world and is one of the stumbling blocks to delivery of adequate health care (WHO, 2013). Many organizations have not yet discovered that retaining nurses in hospitals and health care system as a whole is significant in terms of saving on costs associated with replacing nursing staff. Furthermore, it improves patient's outcomes. When the nursing staff is destabilized by frequent resignations the disruption and inconsistency of service may have a negative impact on patient care and safety (Sandra, 2009). Employing knowledgeable people for a job is important for an employer but retention is more important than employing as there is no loss of opportunities for the talented person. The reason is because there are many organizations looking for such employees (Mark A. Huselid, 2017). Health systems are based on six building blocks namely health service delivery, health information system, health financing, human resource management and medical products, vaccines and technologies, and leadership and governance, (WHO, 2007).

Malawi has been experiencing human resource for health crisis since 2004, with 45% vacancy rate across the health sector. The contributing factors vary from weak human resource capacity including a weak human resource management system, complex and inefficient employment procedures, weak regulation of workforce, lack of systematic staff performance appraisal, lack of clear link between workload and establishment, poor motivation of staff, uncoordinated training, inadequate skills and knowledge of health workers (Malawi Health Policy, 2017). This has led to both the inability to retain nurses and shortages in primary health facilities and consequently a crisis in the nursing profession in Malawi. This has in turn contributed to high maternal mortality in the country because most clinical care is performed by mid-level providers. Data on the challenge of retention of nurses show that in public health facilities 66% of nursing positions are vacant due to the migration of nurses to private hospitals and outside the country (Malawi Health Sector Strategic Plan, 2017-2022).

Lilongwe District is facing challenges of retention of nurses more than other districts in Malawi and hence this has a negative effect on the public health facilities in Malawi. The results are dissatisfied patients, impaired safety of patients and even death which create

negative reputation of the hospitals. The shortage of nurses is huge and as a result public health facilities cannot provide quality health care. A health survey conducted by Safe Motherhood in 2012 showed that 10% of nurses in Lilongwe District resigned from public health facility to private hospitals while others relocated to other countries abroad. In addition, a five year Safe Motherhood evaluation project in 2013 reported that 15% of nurses in Lilongwe District left the public health facilities to non-Governmental organizations. This study was conducted to determine the factors that influence career growth on nurses' retention in Public health facilities in Lilongwe District, Malawi.

Methods

Research Design: This was a descriptive cross sectional study with mixed method approaches. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected. Data was collected using structured questionnaire and a key informant interview guide. The questionnaire had three point Likert scale with responses ranging from Agree, Neutral and Disagree. Qualitative data was collected among the principal nursing officers to have an indepth analysis on the influence of career growth on retention among nurses working in primary health facilities in Lilongwe District.

Study Site: The study was carried out in Lilongwe District in Malawi. The study sample include public primary health facilities. The selected facilities were Area 18, Area 25, Kabudula, Mitundu and Nathenje Health Centers.

Sampling Procedures and Sample size: The target population was all nurses 1,247, from 46 public primary health facilities in Lilongwe District (MOH, 2017). The researchers ranked the 46 facilities by patient workload and number of nurses and purposively selected the first five facilities which had the highest volumes of patients. The five sampled facilities had a total of 135 nurses who comprised 130 nurses and five principal nursing officers. Census was used to determine the study sample, where all the 135 nurses from the five selected facilities we included in the study. The researcher pre-tested the questionnaire to determine its accuracy, clarity, validity, and reliability. The pre-test was done in Mchinji District. A reliability coefficient of 0.7 was achieved upon correlation of the responses.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science software version 23, while qualitative data was analyzed using thematic content. The research questions in this study were tested using the Pearson's Rho (r) and its corresponding p-value. The psychometric Likert based questions were analyzed by the help of mean scores for each question asked. Correlational analysis was also performed to show the direction and significance of each variable. The study used the following functional model $Y=f(X_1, X_2) + \varepsilon$

Ethical Consideration: The researchers sought research ethical approval from Kenya Methodist University Scientific Ethics and Research Committee and Ministry of Health Scientific Ethics committee in Malawi. Informed consent was sought from the respondents. This was to assure the respondents that the information that was provided would be treated as confidential and utilized to strengthen and improve the health system in Malawi.

Results

Respondents' Socio-demographic Characteristics

A total of 130 questionnaires was administrated in this study. However, 115 (89%) questionnaires were fully filled and were included analysis. The study sought to find out the demographic characteristics of the respondents in terms of gender, age, academic qualification and work experience. The results are shown in **Table 1**.

The demographic characteristics show that majority of the respondents 76(66.1%) were female and 39(33.9%) were male. Most of the respondents 44(38.3%) were aged 31- 40 years. Only 8(7%) were aged less than 25 years and 13 (11.3%) over 50 years old. Further the results indicated that majority of respondents 86(74.8%) had Diploma level of education, those with a Degree qualification were 15(13%) and those with a Certificate qualification were 12.2%. With regard to work experience, majority of respondents 73(63.5%) had 1-5 years of experience, and only 7(6.1%) and 2(1.7%) had work experience of 11-15 years and 16 years and above, respectively.

Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Characteristics (n=115)

Characteristics	Respondents N(%)
Gender	
Male	39 (33.9)
Female	76 (66.1)
Age	
< 25	8 (7.0)
25 - 30	35 (30.4)
31 - 40	44 (38.3)
41 - 50	15 (13.0)
51	13 (11.3)
Qualifications	
Certificate	14 (12.2)
Diploma	86 (74.8)
Bachelor's Degree	15 (13.0)
Work Experience	
<1	16 (13.9)
1-5	73 (63.5)
6-10	17 (14.8)
11-15	7 (6.1)
>16	29(1.7)

Retention of Nurses in Public Primary Health Facilities

The study results reviewed that majority of the respondents disagreed that they are satisfied in their job. Majority (mean score, 2.54) disagreed that they enjoyed the facility organizational culture, (mean score, 2.76) do not find their work at the health facility meaningful; (mean score, 2.33) felt that facility management does not value their contribution, (means core, 2.43) felt that they are not in the right organization (mean score,

2.11) said they do not encourage other nurses to join public health facilities, and (mean score, 2.69) said that they work in the current facility because they have no choice.

From the key informant interview guide all the principal nursing officers agreed that nurses are not satisfied with their jobs. One Key Informant said the following:

“... Sister, nurses are not satisfied and are unhappy in primary public health facilities because of the working conditions. You can imagine that they are not given enough nursing resources and the work load is just too much for them. They are however left with no option but to help the patients who are still seeking health care in public health facilities...”. (Key Informant, B).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Retention of Nurses

Statement	Agreed	Neutral	Disagree	Mean	SD
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)		
I enjoy health facility organization culture	28(24.4)	24(20.9)	63(54.8)	2.54	1.279
I find my work at the health facility meaningful	48(41.7)	8(7)	59(51.3)	2.76	1.418
The facility management value my contribution	26(22.6)	15(13)	74(64.3)	2.33	1.269
I always feel that I am in the right organization	27(23.5)	18(15.7)	70(60.9)	2.43	1.305
I often encourage other nurses to join public health facilities.	17(14.7)	17(14.8)	81(70.4)	2.11	1.15292
I am working here because I choose to.	37(32.2)	17(14.8)	61(53.0)	2.69	1.43377

Training as a Form of Career Growth

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on Training

Statement	Agree N(%)	Neutral N(%)	Disagree N(%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
I always participated in trainings done in this organization	19(16.5)	25(21.7)	71(61.8)	2.35	1.085
My organization always send nurses for upgrading	10(16.5)	18(15.7)	87(75.6)	1.95	.972
Nurses are given equal chance to upgrade in their career	20(17.4)	14(12.2)	81(70.4)	2.06	1.245

The study findings as indicated in **Table 3** revealed that majority of the respondents disagreed that they are given a chance for upgrading in their career (mean score, 1.95), nearly three quarters indicated that they are not give equal chance for upgrading (mean

score, 2.06), and over half disagreed that they participated in trainings done in their organization (mean score 2.35).

The results shows that majority of the respondents disagreed that nurses always participate in training. Further the respondents disagreed that the organization often send nurses for upgrading and that nurses are not given equal chance of upgrading. All key informants agreed that nurses are not satisfied with the career growth practices offered at their organizations. One of the key informant lamented saying:

“... Sister, most of nurses at my health facility are at diploma level, they need upgrading in their careers in order to deliver quality nursing care but the government is very slow in responding to our request. What can I do in order to train my nurses who are working so hard day and night; the answer is nothing although I am trying so hard.” (Key Informant, E)

Promotion as a Form of Career Growth

The study sought to find out the influence of promotion on retention of nurses in public primary health facilities. The results are shown in Table 4. Results revealed that majority of the respondents disagreed that they were given opportunity for career growth by managers in their health facilities (mean score, 2.18). Majority of the respondents indicated that they were not promoted by managers in their organizations (mean score, 2.05). This was despite close to a half of them indicating that they had enough knowledge and skills to work in this organization.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics on Promotion

Statement	Agree N(%)	Neutral N(%)	Disagree N(%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
There are many opportunities for career growth in this organization	19(16.5)	14(12.2)	91(71.3)	2.18	1.089
Managers in this organization always Promote the employees in their careers	12(10.5)	24(20.9)	79(68.7)	2.05	1.025
I have enough knowledge & skills to work in this organization	48(41.7)	11(9.6)	56(48.6)	2.89	1.497

The results also indicate an interesting trend of close to a half of the respondents indicating they did not have enough skills and knowledge to work in the organization. Probably this could explain why majority felt that that managers don't promote employees in their career due to inadequate skills. The Principal nursing officer from one of the health facilities said that:

“... most of the nurses at my facility need knowledge and skills in order to deliver quality nursing care but the chance for in service training is not there because of financial issues at our health facility, so how can I develop my nurses in their career. The answer is, I have no way of developing my nurses...”
(Key Informant, A)

The Principal nursing officer from one of the health facilities said that:

“... most of the nurses at my facility need knowledge and skills in order to deliver quality nursing care but the chance for in service training is not there because of financial issues at our health facility, so how can I develop my nurses in their career. The answer is, I have no way of developing my nurses... ”.

(Key Informant, C)

From the above results all the respondents disagree that they have many opportunity of career growth, managers promote employees in their career and that they have enough knowledge and skills to work in the organization.

Inferential Statistical Analysis

The main objective of the study was to examine influence of career growth on nurses’ retention in public primary health facilities. In order to assess the relationships among the independent variables and dependent variable, a bivariate analysis was conducted. This analysis set to determine whether each of the independent variables in this study that is, training (X₁) and promotion (X₂) had any influence on career growth. The results for each variable in this study are given by the Pearson’s Rho (r) and its corresponding *p-value* as indicated in (Table 5).

Table 5: Bivariate Linear Correlation Analysis: All variables

		Retention of nurses	Training	Promotion
Retention of Nurses	Pearson Correlation	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	N	115		
Training	Pearson Correlation	0.691**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001		
	N	115	115	
Promotion	Pearson Correlation	0.719**	0.717**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.001	
	N	115	115	115

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results of the correlation analysis show varied degrees of interrelationships. The results suggested that training and promotion of nurses influence the retention of nurses in public primary health facilities in Lilongwe District. Training (X₁) was statistically significantly correlated with retention of nurses ($r = .691^{**}$, $P < .001$) and promotion (X₂) was statistically significantly correlated with retention of nurses ($r = .719^{**}$, $P < .001$). This implies that any improvement in training and promotion of nurses will result in higher retention of nurses in public primary health facilities in Lilongwe District.

Table 6 shows the multiple regression analysis that was done on the two factors (training and promotion) to test their combined influence on retention of nurses in public primary health facilities in Lilongwe District. The regression output containing all the two variables in this study was found to be valid ($F_{(2,112)} = 77.4$, $P < .001$) meaning the two factors in this study are good predictors explaining the variations of nurses retention in public primary health facilities.

Table 6: Model Validity

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	72.746	2	36.373	77.394	.000 ^b
	Residual	52.637	112	0.470		
	Total	125.383	114			

a. Dependent Variable: Y

b. Predictors: (Constant), X₁, X₂

The results of regression analysis in **Table 7**, indicate significant influences of career growth on nurses’ retention in Lilongwe District. The coefficient of determination (R-squared) of 0.580 shows that 58% of the total variations of retention of nurses can be explained by two independent variables (Training and Promotion). The adjusted R-squared of 0.580 show that these factors, in exclusion of the constant variable, explained by the change of retention of nurses in public health facilities by 58%. The remaining percentage (42%) can be explained by the factors excluded in the multiple regression models under investigation in this study. The standard error of estimate (0.580) shows the average deviation of the independent variables from the line of best fit.

Table 7: Models Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R	Std Error of The estimate	Durbin-Waston
1	.762 ^a	.580	.68555	.580	1.720

a. Predictors: (constant) Training and Promotion.

b. Independent Variable: Retention of nurses

The multiple regressions results shown in **Table 8** indicate that training (X₁: $\beta_1 = .430, P < .001$) and promotion (X₂: $\beta_2 = .512, P < .001$) influenced the retention of nurses under investigation in this study. However promotion of nurses (X₂: $\beta_2 = .512, P < .001$) has more influence on nurses retention followed by training ($r = .430, P < 0.001$). Based on this study, key career influence on nurses retention are upgrading of nurses through offering training and providing opportunities for promotion.

Table 8: Influence of career on nurses Retention: Regression Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.351	.182		1.927	.057
	X ₁	.430	.105	.361	4.109	.000
	X ₂	.512	.098	.460	5.242	.000

Discussions

In this study, majority of the respondents were female and it was observed that there was gender disparity in the distribution of the respondents. These findings agree with Hansen study in Turkey which reviewed that nursing is primarily a female dominant profession. In that study, male students indicated that nursing is not their role, because almost half of them (48.6%) saw nursing as a female profession. Cakmakci (2003) reported that 82 % of the male high school students did not prefer nursing as a career and they believed that nursing should only be a female profession. Hansen (2002) reported that females disagree that males are better suited to nursing than women.

The study results reviewed that majority of the respondents disagreed that they are satisfied with their job. The findings are in agreement with Herzberg's theory (1966) that stipulates that addition or removal of the same need stimuli will enhance or detract the employee's satisfaction. Herzberg's findings indicate that factors garnering job satisfaction are separate from factors leading to poor job satisfaction and nurse's retention. Herzberg's system of needs is segmented into motivators and hygiene factors. Like Maslow's Hierarchy, motivators are often unexpected bonuses that foster the desire to excel. Hygiene factors include expected conditions that if missing will create dissatisfaction and the desire to leave the organization. Employers must utilize positive reinforcement methods while maintaining expected hygiene factors to maximize nurses' satisfaction and retention.

Findings from the descriptive statistics on training revealed that nurses have inadequate opportunities of upgrading their career. The bivariate linear correlation analysis indicated a significant positive influence of training on retention of nurses. These results are similar to results by Srinivas (2008) that showed that there is a strong association between training opportunities in organizations and sustainable employee retention. Ramlall (2003), revealed a significant relationship between all the dimensions of retention besides the intention to leave. Ramlall (2003) demonstrated that insufficient training opportunities forced workers to quit from their current employment. Another study by (Owens, 2006) found a significant connection between employee retention and training practices. Other studies by (Boon & Arumugam, 2006 and Bashir and Ramay (2008) support the previous proposition. In these studies, they reveal the existence of positive and significant relationship between training practices and employee retention rate. From the study findings it could be implied that training and promotion at workplace results in high employee retention rates.

The findings agreed with the Quality Management policy in Malawi (QMHP, 2017) which enforces policies that promote retention of health workers in health sectors such as deploy staff according to staffing needs and norms at all levels of health care. QMHP policy also seeks to enhance knowledge and skills of human resource for health in quality management through pre- and in service training, introduce mechanism for and operationalize the coordination of quality management trainings at all levels and strengthen mechanisms for motivating staff. Managers in health sectors have not yet started implementing strategies mentioned above.

A study by Fisher and Lyle, (2013) collaborates the study finding on the process and importance of career advancement in organizations. This study revealed that once the

organization has been set up the first priority is to establish the job training and development needs of the organization. This will involve the use of descriptions, employee's appraisal records, and other data which may indicate such needs. The next step is to plan for the training required to meet the needs identified. This entails such matters as setting budgets and time tables, and deciding on the objectives, content and methods of training to be employed. The implementation of plans is usually a joint affair between the training specialist and their line and functional colleagues. Having implemented the required training it is important to evaluate the results as far as possible so that subsequent changes to content and method can be made if necessary.

This study finding is in line with Diana Coker (2016) who observed that there are certain career developments that you as an employer can take to have a great rate of employee retention. Demand for better talent is rising; companies are building career advancement strategies as a cost-effective way for retaining employees. Strategies include paying for various classes that employees attend for enhancing their skills, recruiting internal career coaches to groom their resumes. This prepares candidates so that they can be poached by competitors or other companies, but in fact, such initiatives raise employee morale and makes them more loyal towards your organization.

This study also concurs with the study done in Zambia by Mullins, (2010) on the causes of nurses' shortages in health care organizations and retention of nurses. This study established that the lack of opportunity for upgrading by nurses in their career and lack of promotion lead to turnover of nurses. The study further suggests that the possible solutions to retaining nurses include encouraging registered nurses to pursue advanced education in nursing by obtaining post basic certificates and encourage nurses to continue studying up to masters and doctoral degrees. Although this can be seen as a pathway towards self-actualization, it could also lead to frustration, burnout and eventually intent to leave if the graduate is not adequately and suitably placed.

In addition this study findings also concur with a study by Dhruba K. B., (2004), who discovered that organizations have to develop right type of career development programs so as to make the people grow to their full potential and to retain skilled, competent and talented employees in the organization. Career developments ensure a supply of abilities and talents, whereas human resource planning projects demand for talents and abilities. The supportive and integrated effort of top-level management of the organization as well as system analyst for effective career development and human resource planning are needed for maximizations of both demand and supply of talents and abilities.

Conclusions

From the findings, it is evident that career growth influences the retention of nurses in public primary health facilities. The study has established that nurses are not given equal chances for career growth. In addition nurses do not always participate in trainings done in their health facilities besides the quality management enforcement policy on training and upgrading of health workers by the Ministry of Health of Malawi.

The study has also established that opportunities and promotion given to nurses are not adequate. One of the strategies of retaining nurses in public primary health facilities in Lilongwe District is to provide training opportunities and promotion chances for nurses to advance their knowledge and skills. This could be done through on the job training in health facilities in Lilongwe District.

The study concludes that nurses in public primary health facilities are not satisfied because they feel that managers do not value their contribution, they are not in the right organization and do not enjoy the organizational culture hence posing a challenge to retaining them. The study recommends that: (i) managers in public primary health facilities should enforce health quality management policy to promote training and upgrading of nurses as stipulated by the Ministry of Health, (ii) managers in primary public health facilities should provide career growth opportunities for nurses through on job training to enhance their knowledge and skills, and (iii) managers should plan for promotion based on qualification and performance of nurses.

Authors Contributions: Priscilla Tembo conceptualized the study. All authors contributed to study design and data analysis. All the authors reviewed and approved the final version of the publication manuscript.

New knowledge: Nurses perceived promotion to be a more important contributor to their career growth than training and subsequently retention in public primary health care facilities.

Competing interest: The researcher had no any competing interest.

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