



## Healthcare Workers Around the Globe Face Increased Stress and Burnout: The Need for a Response from Healthcare Organizations

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### Abstract

**Background:** Estimates are that the world will face a nursing shortage of 13 million nurses by 2030. Stress, burnout, and the recent global pandemic have worsened a growing crisis of physical and psychological strain among healthcare workers worldwide. Current research has not identified organizational or verified self-care interventions to improve this situation long term; however, healthcare leaders and organizations are urged to provide individualized resources to support healthcare workers across the globe while more rigorous studies are developed and implemented.

**Objectives:** Previous studies have reported some benefits of stress reduction with the use of relaxation spaces, mindfulness-based stress reduction, yoga, Tai Chi, cognitive behavioral therapy, psychotherapy, as well as other interventions when individualized to match the unique healthcare worker and the severity of their symptoms. **Approach:** The National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety in the United States and the World Health Organization have developed resources and guidelines for healthcare organizations to utilize while awaiting further research. **Conclusion:** This perspective essay aims to increase awareness of the current crisis and promote future research studies and funding for appropriate interventions to support the healthcare workforce globally.

**Keywords:** stress, burnout, healthcare workers, pandemic, global

**Paper type:** Critical Essay & Perspective

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## Introduction

More than half of United States (U.S.) healthcare workers (HCW) report burnout along with the frequent accompanying symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia, fatigue, apathy, headaches, and weight changes (Murthy, 2022; Cleveland Clinic, 2022). The impact on the healthcare worker is concerning, but the subsequent effect on patient outcomes should alarm the general population. Research has shown that improving the emotional and psychological health of HCWs could reduce the current 250,000 deaths a year caused by medical errors. Inappropriate workloads, interpersonal difficulties, and extensive work hours all contribute to HCW burnout, fewer workers, and ultimately decreased patient safety (Garcia et al., 2019).

## Global Nursing Shortages

In addition to the negative emotional and psychological impact on nurses, the increased stress and pressures of the COVID-19 era have exacerbated an already worrisome nursing shortage. HCW burnout, exhaustion, and HCW deaths will have created a global crisis deficit by 2030 of an estimated 9 million nurses according to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2022a), or worse, 13 million nurses according to the International Council of Nurses (ICN, n.d.). Specific shortages are expected to number 123,000 in Australia, 117,000 in Canada, 140,600 in the United Kingdom (UK), and 275,000 in the U.S. (Baumann et al., 2023; Royal College of Nursing, 2022., Victoria University Online, 2022; WHO, 2022a).

*Table 1*  
**Anticipated Nursing Shortage by 2030**

Country	Shortage
Australia	123,000
Canada	117,000
United Kingdom	140,600
United States	275,000

The problem is compounded in historically diverse and marginalized groups. In their 2021 Work and Wellbeing Survey results, due to work stressors and discrimination, Black and Hispanic workers, male LGBTQ+ workers, and disabled workers report being significantly more stressed. And they are likely to seek employment outside of their current workplace within the next year compounding an already disturbing pattern of worker mental stress, burnout, and an attrition dilemma (APA, 2021).

In an unfortunate irony, the solution that many economically privileged countries have implemented has created a worsening crisis for underprivileged nations as skilled nurses have been recruited internationally to wealthier nations. This is devastating in some African nations which possess only 4% of the world's healthcare workers yet face 25% of the disease burden. In fact, this situation has weakened approximately 55 national healthcare systems in lower-income nations. This creates an urgent need for all nations to commit to respecting the recommendations of the WHO Global Code of Practice by reducing nursing migration and expanding domestic education and workplace pay and benefits to maintain global access in all nations. These potentially unethical recruiting practices have created dissatisfaction among domestic nurses as recruited or traveling nurses are often paid a much higher rate for their services

(Agyeman-Manu et al., 2023; Baumann et al., 2023; Buchan et al., 2022; WHO, 2022b).

## Burnout in Nurses Around the Globe

In a 2022 report, the ICN found countries around the world reporting a burnout crisis in nurses. Recent studies have reported burnout statistics as high as 40% of Ugandan nurses, 22% of Australian nurses, 60% of Belgian nurses, and 63% of U.S. nurses, as summarized in Table 2 below. In addition, they reported depression, insomnia, work dissatisfaction, and suicidal ideation in a concerning number of nurses in locations such as Lebanon, the United Kingdom, Australia, and China (Buchan et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2019; Ferry et al., 2021).

*Table 2*  
**Numbers of Nurses in International Locations Reporting Burnout**

Country	Percentage
Belgium	60%
Uganda	40%
United States	63%
Australia	22%
United Kingdom	79%

How did we arrive at such an extreme situation of burnout among our global nursing workforce? There is no doubt a previously troubling trend was only compounded by the recent global pandemic.

## Conclusion

### *Where Do We Go from Here to Improve the Global Nursing Workforce*

With such staggering statistics, it is imperative that nurse leaders and HCWs around the world focus resources and education aimed at improving the working conditions and mental well-being of the global healthcare workforce. Unfortunately, across multiple studies, there has not been a clear determination of the most effective evidence-based strategies for improving burnout in nurses worldwide (Pollock et al., 2020). Therefore, first and foremost, a renewed dedication to continued research to determine the best evidence-based interventions to assist our global nurses to reduce burnout and improve resiliency is in order. Some potential interventions and areas for further research are described in the following studies and organizational directives.

A 2023 systematic review consisting of 117 studies with a combined total of 11,119 HCW participants found that interventions aimed at allowing subjects to focus on their stress by discussing their feelings and stressors and/or participating in cognitive behavioral therapy or skills training were effective for up to a year. Likewise, interventions aimed at assisting patients to not focus on their stress, such as yoga, Tai Chi, and acupuncture were also effective for up to one year. Unfortunately, not all the studies included blinding in their randomization limiting the overall confidence in the interpretations. Lack of blinding means that the participants or researchers were aware of the treatment assignment. This could introduce bias. This review concurrently looked at the effectiveness of work-related interventions, such as adjusting workload

demands, and found there may be some benefit for, again, up to one year. The authors concluded that more rigorous, prolonged follow-up studies should be developed and conducted (Tamminga et al., 2023).

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), a division of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), has developed a new program aimed to assist HCWs with mental health needs. The Health Worker Mental Health Initiative:

aims to raise awareness of mental health needs including suicide-risk and substance use disorders, eliminate barriers to accessing care, identify workplace and community supports for HCWs, reduce the stigma for seeking and receiving mental health care, identify and improve data, screening tools, trainings, resources, and policies to address health worker mental health (NIOSH, 2022, para 2).

A rapid review which includes 14 studies published in 2020 addresses stress reduction techniques for healthcare workers specifically affected by pandemics, describing organizational and self-care interventions. The review describes the symptoms of stress, and post-traumatic stress syndrome experienced by some HCWs following front-line care experiences during a pandemic. Psychological stress and symptoms are compounded by concern for personal and family well-being while providing care for seriously ill patients. This was especially true for Chinese healthcare workers, specifically those providing care in Wuhan. Personal protective equipment (PPE) shortages only served to worsen psychological wellness during Covid-19 (Callus et al., 2020).

This review stressed the importance of personal preferences and needs among HCWs in how they desire to address their mental health needs. Some subjects desired training in self-care techniques, such as progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness-based stress management, and other relaxation techniques, while others wanted training to help address the distress they were witnessing among others. Some HCWs expressed a desire to obtain training from multimedia sources, while others, usually those with more severe symptoms, desired face-to-face interventions such as psychotherapy or counseling from professionals (Callus et al., 2020).

Callus et al., in the 2020 review, also describe an evidence-based approach used in the U.K. to support psychological health. Here, digital platforms for providing support were explored. Virtual appointments and digital applications can improve accessibility for some HCWs needing psychological support. This UK project developed a digital package using the “Agile methodology” providing team leaders with guidance on “reducing social stigma, increasing peer and family support, self-care strategies to improve sleep and rest, shift work, healthy lifestyle behaviors, and emotion management strategies” (p.7).

In addition, the review addresses the need for organizational interventions to support HCWs in some of the following ways: reduced workload, improved workflow, improving, and offering opportunities for open communication, rest and relaxation areas, and financial support for HCWs and family members experiencing personal illness. HCWs should have adequate access to food, supplies, and PPE. Assuring

HCWs of adequate supplies of PPE and the availability of stress management resources, which consider personal preferences for delivery methods, has been shown to provide psychological support and reduce distress among these providers (Callus et al., 2020).

One initiative for consideration is promoting the importance of mental wellbeing in healthcare students before they transition to the workforce. Not only will this provide students with the necessary skills and resources needed to improve academic performance, but these skills can be carried into their careers, benefiting the nurse and their patients. Ohio State University (OSU) has developed wellness programs for students, faculty, and healthcare workers within their colleges and medical facilities. Their MINDBODYSTRONG program is an evidence-based program providing education to healthcare students with research results reporting decreased depression, suicidal ideation, improved mental resiliency, academic improvements, and other mental and physical benefits through cognitive-behavioral and resiliency training (Ohio State University College of Nursing, 2023). Expansion of such programs that begin in the formative, academic training years of nurses could lead to a healthier, more resilient future workforce and improve retention. Future research globally could benefit the student nurses and practicing nurses utilizing the model OSU has provided through its expansive programs.

Throughout much of the world, HCWs have reportedly experienced elevated levels of stress and burnout for decades. Recent pandemics, especially the worldwide impact of Covid-19, have exacerbated an already overwhelming and severe situation. With current, and projected HCW shortages, it is more urgent than ever that healthcare organizations and world health leaders turn their attention to the physical and psychological health needs of these workers around the globe. Unfortunately, few rigorous studies demonstrate the long-term benefits of stress management interventions and increasing resiliency among the health worker population. Healthcare researchers and world leaders need to address this vitally important subject with increased funding and resources for studying and developing evidence-based approaches for reducing the burden of elevated stress, burnout, and the resulting physical and psychological consequences for HCWs. In addition, healthcare organizations should promote psychological well-being by providing organizational and self-care interventions aimed at supporting the HCW in ways the worker feels most beneficial to their individual needs and circumstances.

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## About the authors



Dr. Crystal White, DNP, MSN, FNP-C, RN is the Director of Graduate Nursing and an Assistant Professor for Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College. She came to SMWC in 2021 after having served as a family nurse practitioner and primary care provider for nearly 10 years and as a registered nurse for 30 years. While she continues to provide primary care services a few days per month, most of her time is now devoted to providing student-centered, excellent classroom experiences for her MSN-FNP students, and providing servant leadership for her department.

Dr. White earned her Doctor of Nursing Practice degree in 2020 from Frontier Nursing University where she completed her scholarly doctoral project on stress management and decreasing burnout in healthcare providers. She earned her Master of Science in Nursing in 2012 from Indiana Wesleyan University. She is board-certified as a family nurse practitioner through the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners and a member of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners. She is the President of Omega Pi, the SMWC Chapter of STTI (the International Honor Society for Nursing) and serves on various college committees including the Reimagine Wellness Committee.

Dr. White most enjoys adventures with her family, especially her four grandchildren. She has also served as a short-term missionary in Cuba, China, Mongolia, Ghana in West Africa, and Trinidad and Tobago.



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Throughout her career, Dr. Myers has demonstrated her versatility by contributing to various facets of clinical nursing practice. Her extensive experience spans pulmonology, sleep medicine, narcolepsy, nephrology, and pain medicine. Her doctoral research focused on "Early Screening for Lung Cancer: A Practice Change in Primary Care," emphasizing her dedication to improving patient care and outcomes.

Dr. Myers achieved double board certification as a Family Nurse Practitioner and a Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner. Beyond her professional pursuits, she finds her greatest joy in her role as a mother to three children.