

Where Do Nurses Thrive? A Call for Healthy Work Environments [Editorial]

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This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

WATSON, Adrianna L, BOND, Carmel, JARDEN, Rebecca and CLEARY, Michelle (2026). Where Do Nurses Thrive? A Call for Healthy Work Environments [Editorial]. Journal of Advanced Nursing. [Article]

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Where Do Nurses Thrive?

A Call for Healthy Work Environments

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Conflicts of interest: None to declare.

Data Availability: The data underlying this article are available in the article.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI): The authors used Grammarly to assist with spelling and grammatical correction of the manuscript. The intellectual content, concepts, analysis, interpretation, arguments, and original scholarly writing were conceived and developed by the authors. All suggestions generated by Grammarly were critically reviewed, evaluated, and, where appropriate, incorporated by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript and its conclusions.

Nursing is practiced in systems defined by long shifts, rotating schedules, emotional labor, constant interruption, and relentless exposure to human suffering, uncertainty, and competing demands. A healthy work environment is more than adequate equipment, technology, or patient-care resources. It is also relational, encompassing leadership, communication, teamwork, culture, autonomy, recognition, and nurse participation (Williams et al., 2024). The environment in which nurses practice is associated with their well-being, morale, team relationships, burnout, productivity, and the quality and safety of patient care (Bond et al., 2025; Lessi et al., 2025).

This is also a matter of decent work for nurses. The United Nations *Sustainable Development Goal 8* [SDG8] calls on the world to promote inclusive, sustainable, and decent work for all. As the largest healthcare workforce, nurses are central to achieving this goal. Nursing itself must also provide the conditions of decent work that SDG8 seeks to promote. When nurses are placed in unsafe, under-resourced, and chronically devalued environments, health systems do more than risk psychological distress, burnout, and attrition, with consequent workforce shortages. They compromise access, safety, quality, gender and equity, and the long-term sustainability of the workforce on which every health system depends. If the world is serious about achieving decent work for all, then it must be serious about nursing work (International Council of Nurses [ICN], 2026).

Healthy work environments do not emerge spontaneously. They require deliberate organizational design and sustained accountability from organizations, leaders, and policymakers, with nurses participating through shared governance, decision-making, and advocacy (Williams et al., 2024). When these commitments are absent, poor governance and management, inadequate staffing, excessive workloads, unsupportive workplace cultures,

bullying, and teamwork difficulties can contribute to compassion fatigue, impaired well-being, difficulty delivering quality patient care, and decisions to leave (Banks et al., 2025; Bond et al., 2025). A realistic assessment of the nursing work environment should therefore examine everyday leadership, communication, workload, interpersonal relationships, negative workplace behaviors, recognition, mentoring, and opportunities for professional development (Banks et al., 2025).

That examination must be globally inclusive and grounded in justice. Nurses can be fully empowered only when they are structurally enabled through safe working conditions, adequate staffing, fair pay, supportive leadership, and full scope of practice (ICN, 2026). Today's nursing workforce is practicing amid ethical and technological complexity, workforce shortages, violence and conflict, and widening structural health inequities (ICN, 2026). These conditions and structural constraints shape whether nurses have the time, authority, support, and resources to provide quality care sustainably for patients and the communities they serve. When nurses have adequate staffing and resources, supportive leadership, meaningful participation, and strong collegial relationships, they experience better well-being and productivity, with potential benefits for the quality and safety of patient care (Bond et al., 2025; Lessi et al., 2025). When these conditions are absent, nurses experience poorer physical and mental health, including impaired sleep, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, alongside increased burnout, reduced productivity, and diminished retention (Lessi et al., 2025).

The nursing workforce should not be regarded as a systems cost center to be controlled. It is a high-return investment in human health, system resilience, and social stability. Empowered nurses improve clinical outcomes, enhance equitable access to care, reduce hospital admissions, lower overall system costs, and strengthen social and economic performance (ICN, 2026). This is

why factors such as staffing, education, regulation, leadership, and workplace well-being and safety are at the heart of community thriving. A healthy work environment allows nurses to feel safe, supported, and able to grow professionally while working autonomously. These conditions enable nurses to think clearly, act decisively, and stay in the profession long enough to lead meaningful change (Lessi et al., 2025).

Healthy work environments are created through intentionality and collaboration. This special issue highlights the breadth of epistemologies and worldviews informing research and the future design of healthy work environments. Each perspective offers distinct insights into mechanisms, context, and meaning, revealing different pathways, power relations, and dimensions of wellbeing and resilience in work environments. Partnering with people with lived and living experience forms the foundation of these works, from question formation and study design to interpretation and knowledge translation. Nurses deserve healthy workplaces that enable them to stay, contribute their expertise, build meaningful relationships, and participate in positive change. To support decent work, these conditions cannot be overlooked; investments must be made intentionally to improve the health and wellbeing of the nursing workforce and ensure the short-, medium-, and long-term sustainability of both patient care and healthcare systems.

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