

NURSES – SERVANTS OR THE NEW ELITE? OR HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN MORE NURSES

“Don’t go into nursing, you’ll end up wiping people’s backsides.” This sentence, still heard by many young people at home, perfectly captures the stereotypes healthcare professions continue to face. The problem is that these views are passed down from generation to generation and significantly influence decisions already made by 14- or 15-year-olds when choosing their secondary school.

Yet, interest in the nursing profession was not always low. During the time of Generation X, secondary medical schools were selective institutions. Over time, however, due to broader social trends, the rise of economic and social science fields, and legislative changes that separated the roles of nurses and practical nurses, they lost part of their appeal. For a period, this led to a decline in both the number and quality of applicants. Today, interest is rising again, but the question remains whether it will be enough given the historical shortage of nurses and the declining demographic curve.

The reality of a practical nurse’s or nurse’s work is fundamentally different from these stereotypes. It is one of the most diverse professions: it includes caring for newborns, adults, and terminally ill patients, working in operating rooms, as well as handling administrative and documentation tasks. It offers both shift-based work and flexible part-time arrangements. For young people who are naturally motivated to help others, it is a profession with a clear sense of purpose and broad career opportunities. What is crucial, however, is to start fostering interest in this career already at the level of primary school students, who are potential applicants to secondary medical schools. Their graduates make up the largest share of future nurses.

One of the decisive factors in career choice is how a profession shapes and presents its own identity. Social identity theory suggests that people naturally identify with groups that enhance their positive self-image. In other words, if a profession is perceived as valuable and respected, people want to join it and stay in it. Even less “attractive” industries manage this—just look at successful social media campaigns that have turned technical professions in the municipal waste company OLO into symbols of pride and societal value.

Healthcare, however, has not yet fully tapped into this potential. An important role is also played by how healthcare professionals themselves, professional chambers, and unions talk about the profession. Communication that focuses primarily on problems without balancing them with positives tends to discourage rather than attract. Professional identity is also weakened by fragmentation among

different groups of healthcare workers—for example, practical nurses are no longer part of the nurses’ chamber but have been moved into a chamber of medical-technical staff.

Paradoxically, the labour market tells a different story. Starting salaries for nurses in larger cities are comparable to, and often higher than, those of university graduates in the humanities. With further education and specialization, a nurse’s salary—without overtime—can rise to the level of a manager in economic fields. Skeptical? Take a look at job portals. Employers are actively competing for healthcare professionals, offering retention bonuses, housing, and above-standard benefits. In many other fields our children graduate from, such competition simply does not exist.

Demographic trends are unforgiving. Within the next five years, approximately a quarter of healthcare workers will reach retirement age. Even if not all leave immediately, the pressure on the system will increase. New generations are smaller, and competition for talent will intensify further. Anyone who has not yet understood the importance of quality management and HR in healthcare will soon face serious challenges.

Organizations will need to address where to find people and how to attract them in a highly competitive environment. This requires strong HR—clearly defined employer value propositions and systematic employer branding. These are areas that still remain outside the focus of many healthcare HR teams.

Equally important is caring for existing employees, reducing turnover, and building an environment where people want to stay. Managers play a crucial role here. Research consistently shows that their behaviour has the greatest impact on team satisfaction and motivation. The assumption that the best expert automatically becomes the best leader is outdated. The sooner healthcare recognizes this, the better. People management is a discipline in its own right and needs to be developed. Top management must demand these competencies, and HR must ensure their systematic development.

So, what should be done to attract and retain practical nurses and nurses in our healthcare system? Each of us must act within our own scope of influence. As healthcare leaders, we should build pride in healthcare professions and in our organizations—through internal communication, storytelling, and employer branding. At the same time, we must improve the quality of our management teams to ensure motivated and high-performing teams working for the benefit of our patients. At Penta Hospitals, we strive to do this every day.

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