

The New Challenges and Countermeasures in Nursing Talent Development in Japan

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Keywords: Aging population; COVID-19 pandemic; Nursing talent development in Japan; Challenges; Countermeasures

Abstract: This paper aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the new challenges faced by nursing talent development in Japan in recent years, exacerbated by the dual impact of declining birth rates and an aging population, coupled with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, targeted policy adjustments, a holistic reevaluation of career planning, and an overall enhancement of nursing talent competence are proposed as strategies to better meet future healthcare and nursing demands. This study seeks to provide substantive reference value for nursing talent development in Japan, concurrently, offers insights that may be applicable to nursing talent development in other countries.

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the global healthcare sector has been profoundly impacted, and the nursing industry in Japan has similarly felt the effects. The issue of population aging has already led to an increased demand for nursing talent, and the pandemic has placed even greater pressure and risks on nursing staff. Against the backdrop of population aging and the post-pandemic era, the demand for nursing talent in Japan significantly exceeds the supply, leading to new challenges for the training of nursing personnel and the sustainable development of the healthcare system.

2. Current Situation of Nursing Talent in Japan and Influencing Factors

With the changing demographic structure in Japan, the pivotal role of nursing talent in healthcare services is becoming increasingly prominent. The situation of nursing talent in Japan encompasses various aspects such as quantity, training systems, and occupational stability, presenting complex multidimensional characteristics.

2.1. Quantity and Demand of Nursing Talent

According to statistics from the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, over the decade from 2011 to 2021, the total number of nursing personnel in Japan has shown a continuous upward trend, reaching 2.149 million, an increase of 640,000, representing a growth rate of 42.4%.

Despite this progress, Japan still faces a shortage of nursing talent. According to population statistics released by the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications in September 2023, the population of individuals aged 65 and above in Japan has reached 36.23 million, accounting for 29.1% of the total population, ranking first globally. Estimates based on the "8th Long-term Care Insurance Business Plan" in Japan indicate that the demand for nursing personnel is expected to reach 2.43 million by 2025, with a talent shortfall of 320,000. By 2040, the demand for nursing personnel is projected to increase to 2.8 million, with a talent shortfall soaring to 690,000. It is evident that despite the increase in the number of nursing personnel, it still falls far short of meeting the rapidly growing needs of the elderly population. The shortage of nursing services remains a pressing issue and is even exacerbating over time.

2.2. Education and Training System, and Structural System of Nursing Talent

According to a survey conducted by the "Nursing Care Worker Training Institution Association" on schools that offer courses for "Certified Care Workers" (referred to as "training schools," including universities and vocational schools offering such courses), the total number of new students enrolled in 2022 was 6,802 (a decrease of 381 from the previous year), with a completion rate of 54.6%. This marks the lowest enrollment since 2014. Particularly in recent years, due to the impact of declining birth rates, the number of new students in training schools has been declining. However, with the establishment of the "nursing" residency status in 2017, training schools intensified efforts to recruit foreign students, leading to a slight increase in new student numbers. Nevertheless, due to the border restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of international students enrolled in 2022 decreased to 1,880 (a decrease of 309 from the previous year), resulting in an overall decrease in new students. The number of training schools in 2022 was 314 (a decrease of 13 from the previous year), representing a reduction of over 20% compared to 406 in 2014. Due to the long-standing issue of insufficient enrollment, some schools are struggling to operate and have had to cease enrollment or abolish nursing care worker training disciplines. A spokesperson from the association expressed concern about the current situation, stating, "Systematic learning at training schools is indispensable for providing high-quality nursing services. If places for learning nursing are lost, it may affect the quality of nursing services in the region in the future."

In terms of the structure of nursing talent in Japan, in 2021, the proportion of nursing personnel aged 60 and above in nursing care facilities and home care services was 13.3% and 24.1%, respectively. The proportions of those aged 40-59 were 49.3% and 47.8%, those aged 30-39 were 19.8% and 12.9%, and those under 30 were 8.5% and 4.8%, respectively. The proportion of female nursing personnel reached 68.4% and 77.7%, respectively. This reflects the trend of an aging workforce in the nursing sector in Japan, with relatively fewer young and male nursing personnel, leading to increasing average age and exacerbating the shortage of nursing personnel. The average age of nursing personnel in 2022 was 44.2 years. The aging age structure of nursing personnel in Japan urgently requires the introduction of new nursing talent to rejuvenate and diversify the Japanese nursing workforce.

2.3. Occupational Status of Nursing Talent

The turnover rate of nursing personnel in Japan is relatively high, reaching 14.3% in 2021. This is mainly due to factors such as high job pressure, adverse working conditions, and low compensation. In particular, inadequate compensation has become a significant constraint on the training of nursing talent in Japan. According to survey data commissioned by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare from the "Care Work Stability Center" in Japan, the

average annual income of monthly salaried employees with over two years of service in the nursing field was ¥3.76 million in 2022, which is relatively lower compared to the national average annual salary of ¥4.58 million. Additionally, the intensity of work for nursing personnel is another factor affecting talent development. According to a survey by the National Trade Union of Labor, the average overtime hours for regular employees is 10.2 hours, while for non-regular employees, it is 3.7 hours, with an overall average overtime of 8.2 hours for the nursing profession. Among nursing personnel who work overtime, a quarter reported having done "unpaid overtime." Nursing care facilities often adopt a "three-shift system," with elderly care recipients who may experience sudden emergencies at any time, and during outbreaks of infectious diseases such as COVID-19, additional isolation and disinfection tasks are required... All these factors contribute to increased workload, leading many to choose resignation, exacerbating the shortage of nursing personnel, which in turn further increases overtime hours, forming a vicious cycle.

3. Challenges Facing the Training of Nursing Talent in Japan in the New Era

The declining birth rate has led to a relatively narrow labor market, where the number of nursing personnel cannot meet the rapidly increasing demand for elderly care. After the pandemic, the demand for nursing services from the elderly population has further increased, making the shortage of nursing talent even more pronounced.

3.1. Urgent Need for Rationalization of Nursing Personnel Age Structure

Under the dual pressures of population aging and the post-pandemic era, Japan is facing not only a shortage of nursing personnel but also an age structure that is in need of rationalization. This age imbalance not only affects the quality of nursing services but also threatens the sustainability of the entire healthcare system.

Firstly, a large number of elderly nursing personnel are reaching retirement age, while the training speed of the new generation of nursing personnel cannot meet the growing demand, resulting in difficulties in managing and operating medical care institutions. In skill-intensive nursing professions, experienced elderly nursing personnel have unique advantages in providing nursing services and handling complex situations. It may be challenging for newly recruited nursing personnel to quickly bridge the experience gap, potentially lowering the quality of medical services and affecting continuity and stability. Secondly, medical advances and the application of new technologies require elderly nursing personnel to continuously learn and adapt to new medical models. In the context of new technologies, elderly nursing personnel need to update their technical capabilities. However, due to age factors, it may be difficult for them to accept new technologies, thereby increasing the training burden on medical institutions. Additionally, long working hours and stressful work environments may lead to unstable health conditions among elderly nursing personnel, prompting them to retire early, exacerbating the shortage of nursing personnel and highlighting new challenges in the industry in terms of talent mobility and reserves in response to population aging and the post-pandemic era.

3.2. Urgency to Adapt to Modernization and Digitization of Healthcare Services

With the rapid development of technology and healthcare, the widespread application of new technologies poses new technical challenges for nursing talent training and practice. The introduction of new technologies such as telemedicine and health monitoring devices requires nursing personnel to not only possess traditional medical knowledge and skills but also adapt to the operation and application of these new technologies. This means that traditional nursing training

systems need to be continuously updated to ensure that nursing personnel are competent in the application of emerging medical technologies. The widespread application of telemedicine technology means that nursing services are no longer limited to medical institutions, requiring nursing personnel to master the use of telemedicine equipment, familiarize themselves with virtual communication tools, and solve network problems and technical failures. Training institutions need to introduce new technology training related to telemedicine while cultivating traditional nursing skills. The widespread application of smart medical devices and robotics technology is changing the way nursing services work, requiring nursing personnel to learn to work with these devices, which involves knowledge of new technology operation training and robot ethics and morals. [1]The promotion of nursing information systems makes patient information more convenient and comprehensive, but it also brings new burdens to nursing personnel, requiring them to learn and adapt to the operation of these systems, improve the efficiency of information processing and management, and comply with information security and patient privacy regulations. Medical advances such as gene therapy and precision medicine in the medical field require higher professional knowledge requirements for nursing personnel, necessitating a deep understanding of genetic test results, understanding individualized treatment plans, and collaborating with medical teams to provide more personalized nursing services. This requires nursing personnel to not only strengthen their learning of relevant medical knowledge but also continuously update their knowledge of medical advances to ensure that they provide patients with the latest medical support. The widespread application of new technologies poses comprehensive requirements for the training of nursing talent, requiring the integration of training in traditional nursing skills and the application of emerging technologies to maintain the professional competitiveness of nursing personnel in healthcare services.

3.3. The Concerning State of Mental Health Among Nursing Personnel

Nursing work itself is a highly stressful and demanding profession, and during the pandemic, nursing personnel faced tremendous psychological pressure, a problem that persists in the post-pandemic era. Factors such as long working hours, risk of infection, and patient uncertainty have had a negative impact on the mental health of nursing personnel. Mental health issues pose a threat to the attractiveness and retention rates of nursing talent. Therefore, it is urgent to cultivate nursing talent with greater psychological resilience who can effectively manage work pressure.

During the pandemic, the working environment of nursing personnel exacerbated psychological burdens. Shortages of medical resources, increased work intensity, and difficulties in communicating with patients' families threatened the job satisfaction and psychological well-being of nursing personnel. Faced with multiple pressures such as a surge in patient numbers, medical uncertainty, and personal infection risks, nursing personnel require higher levels of psychological resilience. While maintaining patient safety in a tense work environment, nursing personnel themselves face the risk of infection, increasing the potential for mental health problems. Additionally, prolonged psychological stress and work intensity may lead to psychological fatigue among nursing personnel, resulting in fatigue, insomnia, anxiety, and other issues, affecting not only their quality of life but also their ability to provide care and compassion to patients.

Even after the pandemic, nursing personnel may continue to experience mental health issues, including fear of infection, emotional pressure from patients, and job uncertainty. Furthermore, faced with the immense medical needs of patients and the operational pressures of medical institutions, the mental health issues of nursing personnel will continue to be challenged.

4. Conclusion

In recent years, although Japan has implemented a series of strategies and measures to address the challenges of nursing talent development in Japan such as improving the treatment of nursing personnel, cultivating diversified talent, and enhancing the acceptance environment for foreign nursing personnel, the evolution of social structures, the exacerbation of the aging population issue, and the emergence of new challenges in the post-pandemic era necessitate further refinement and effective implementation of these policies. [2]This is crucial to ensure the quality and sustainability of nursing services.

4.1. Enhancing the Quantity and Quality of Nursing Talent Development, Establishing a Diversified Training System

The primary task of expanding enrollment channels involves cooperating with secondary schools to provide vocational experience courses, promoting through social media, establishing school-enterprise relationships, strengthening collaboration with medical institutions for practical courses, allowing students to engage in actual work early on, and enhancing the professional reputation. Improve image through professional lectures, invite successful people to share their experiences in seminars, organize students to participate in community services, and increase community recognition of nursing staff. The government should increase investment in nursing schools, provide scholarships and financial support, and establish incentive mechanisms to attract more talent to the nursing profession.

To ensure training quality, raising the admission standards for nursing majors is crucial. Establishing professional subject exams and interview processes to select students more suitable for nursing professions and improve overall standards. Promote professional certification and standardized training to ensure that caregivers have consistent professional standards and are able to adapt to changes in the health care environment and care needs.

Diversified training involves training talents with different backgrounds and experiences. Collaborating with universities and medical schools to implement joint training programs, enabling nursing personnel to acquire professional skills and work collaboratively with other medical personnel. The government should formulate policies to build a diverse nursing workforce in terms of gender, age groups, and nationalities, encouraging men, young people, and individuals from different cultural backgrounds to participate in nursing work, and supporting schools in international cooperation to attract foreign students. Introducing new training modes, such as online training, to broaden training channels. These measures will enhance the quantity and quality of nursing talent development and establish a more diversified training system.

4.2. Implementing Knowledge Updates and Technical Training

To ensure that nursing personnel can adapt to the latest medical knowledge and technological advancements, implementing knowledge updates and technical training is crucial. Firstly, medical institutions, nursing organizations, and professional training institutions should establish close cooperation, develop detailed training plans to comprehensively cover the latest medical knowledge, nursing techniques, and new technology applications. Additionally, strengthening the application of technology, promoting intelligent nursing services, and introducing remote medical care and health monitoring technologies can enhance the efficiency and precision of nursing care. Medical and technical experts are brought in to provide systematic and comprehensive training to nursing staff to enable them to skillfully apply new technologies. To meet the learning needs of different nursing personnel, flexible and diverse learning methods can be provided through online learning platforms

and virtual reality technology. Furthermore, implementing simulation-based training allows nursing personnel to conduct realistic scenario-based exercises in simulated environments using advanced simulation equipment and virtual reality technology, enhancing their ability to respond in real-world situations. This training method not only deepens understanding of new technologies but also enhances practical skills, reduces error rates, and improves the quality and safety of medical services. Finally, promoting interdisciplinary training, collaborating with professionals from other fields, and establishing interdisciplinary training programs enable nursing personnel to comprehensively master relevant knowledge.[3]This helps broaden the nursing personnel's perspectives and improve their acceptance of new technologies and medical advancements. Through these comprehensive strategies, we can better ensure that nursing personnel adapt to new technologies and medical advancements, enhancing their level and quality of medical services.

4.3. Focus on Psychological Health and Stress Management

To help nursing personnel better cope with psychological stress, it is essential to establish a professional psychological support system. This includes a team consisting of psychologists and counselors specifically providing psychological support and counseling services for nursing personnel. This support system can address the psychological health of nursing personnel through regular psychological health training, counseling services, psychological health activities, etc., to promptly identify and address potential psychological issues. In the training process of nursing personnel, more emphasis should be placed on integrating psychological health education content to enhance their awareness of psychological health issues. This includes imparting knowledge about psychological health and cultivating stress management skills. Through education, nursing personnel can better understand their psychological condition, learn to effectively alleviate work-related stress, enhance their ability to cope with work challenges, and establish a healthier and more positive work mindset.

Additionally, various media can be utilized to change the public's traditional impression of the nursing profession and increase public recognition of nursing work through the production of promotional videos, organizing promotional activities, and inviting nursing personnel to participate in public affairs. At the same time, improving the salary and benefits of nursing personnel and increasing the attractiveness of the nursing profession can attract more talented individuals aspiring to a career in the healthcare industry to choose nursing work. These measures aim to enhance the motivation and job satisfaction of nursing practitioners, while also positively promoting the construction of the nursing talent pool and alleviating the psychological stress of nursing personnel.

Acknowledgements

The work was supported by Research Topic for the Development of Social Sciences in Hebei Province in 2023 "Study on the Enlightenment of Nursing Talent Training Experience in Japan under the Background of Aging Population in Hebei Province" (Project Number: 20230205125)

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