Addressing RN burnout

Grad Nurse Asks, Who Heals the Healers?

By Tyler Smith

A few months after starting work on the 8 West Orthopedic/Burn/Surgery Unit at University of Colorado Hospital, Stephanie Wong began to feel strange and discomforting emotions.

A graduate nurse resident, Wong found herself exhausted after a 12-hour shift and sometimes annoyed and short with patients when she was working and hurrying to get to her next task.

“I felt sometimes I was not as compassionate as I wanted to be,” Wong said. “My job is to provide support for the vulnerable, but I felt I was getting burned out – and I was still new.”

Rather than accept those feelings as simply part of a difficult job, Wong decided to look into the problem as part of her required residency project. She talked to other nurses on the unit about feelings of burnout – whether they felt it and what they did about it.

“I wondered what they do to take care of themselves and whether they feel doubts about their career choice,” Wong said. “As nurses we want to help people, but I wondered if we’re sometimes giving so much we are not able to give anymore.”

Short fuse. A literature search Wong conducted showed that nurse burnout is tied to poorer care, decreased job satisfaction and productivity, higher turnover rates – and possibly even higher rates of hospital-acquired infections. Wong found there is even something called the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), used to measure an individual’s feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and decreased personal accomplishment.

The inventory struck a chord with her. “The idea of emotional exhaustion really resonated with me,” she said.

But to what extent did others on her unit struggle with the same issues? To find out, Wong developed and sent out a 12-question Zoomerang survey to nurses, certified nursing assistants and patient services coordinators (see box). She keyed the survey items to the three domains of the MBI.

About 80 percent of staff responded to the survey, sent out in September. The results showed Wong she wasn’t alone in her
feelings of exhaustion. For example, 44 percent said they feel “very emotionally drained from work” either a few times a week (29 percent) or every day (15 percent). For 46 percent, the idea of getting up every morning and facing another day on the job left them feeling fatigued at least a few times a week.

The survey results triggered another question for Wong. “I wondered why nurses are so bad at taking care of themselves,” she said. She recognized in her coworkers “a mentality that it’s easier to give and to neglect ourselves during 12 hours at work.” Could anything be done to change that?

Help in the neighborhood. During this period, Wong also found to her surprise that the hospital is home to The Center for Integrative Medicine (TCFIM), located for years on the fifth floor of the Anschutz Outpatient Pavilion, which offers massage therapy, acupuncture, chiropractic, nutrition and other services — at an employee discount. Yet after she’d gotten a therapeutic massage herself and met TCFIM practice manager Jordan Mann, Wong found — again to her surprise — that employees, including nurses, rarely use the clinic’s services.

“That didn’t make sense to me,” Wong said, given the proximity of the clinic and the relatively inexpensive stress-reducing services it offers. So she decided to make massage therapy for staff “accessible and in their faces” by bringing a TCFIM massage therapist to the unit. She got approval and funding from 8 West Nurse Manager Kelly McDevitt, RN, and set up two evening visits in October close to the evening shift change.

Wong made a sign-up sheet and arranged an office on the unit for the massage therapist, Ann Mathews, who has worked at TCFIM eight years and has been licensed and certified in massage therapy for 27 years. She brought her own massage table, put on soft music and lowered the lights to create a relaxing environment.

Coping strategies. A total of 22 staffers signed up for the 10-minute massages during the two evenings, Mathews said. She found virtually everyone she massaged had one thing in common: taut neck muscles she suspects were caused at least in part by transferring and lifting orthopedic patients. She couldn’t say how much of the muscle tautness was caused by physical exertion and how much by emotional stress.

Even in the abbreviated sessions — a normal massage therapy session lasts at least 30 minutes — Mathews said she noticed people’s breathing slowing down, a sign of relaxation and possibly blood pressure and stress dipping just a bit.

Nurses and other staffers who got the massages said they noticed a difference in the way they felt, Mathews reported.

“Many said they were surprised to learn that a 10-minute massage could have a positive effect,” she said. “Some said, ‘I know I need more.’”

Debra Sibilia, RN, who commutes from Colorado Springs to work the night shift on 8 West, got two massages from Mathews. Sibilia said the long drive and the challenge of managing patients’ pain levels keep her physical and emotional stress levels “pretty high.”

The massages, Sibilia said, were “a subtle reminder to slow down and take some deep breaths. They were a tremendous help.”

She uses other coping strategies during high-stress times, she added. “I try to find a quiet place to sit, usually at the computer in the hallway. I’ll close my eyes and take a few deep breaths, say a little prayer or think some positive thoughts — anything to just help me regain my calmness. If the stress is more serious then I usually find a coworker to talk with for a few minutes.”

Being able to take a lunch or dinner break without a phone would also help to lower the pressure, Sibilia added, “just to have some uninterrupted time, basically to regroup.”

In fact, nursing leadership backs a no-phone break policy, although acceptance of it on units has been spotty, with notable exceptions like the 11 East and West Oncology/BMT units (Insider, Nov. 9, 2011).
Wong, who celebrated her graduation Nov. 16 and will spend at least another year on 8 West, said she plans to encourage her fellow nurses to make relaxation an important part of the unit culture.

“It’s still new and it’s a change and not everyone was turned on to it at first,” she said of the October massage therapy sessions.

“But I learned that if you are passionate about something you have to have determination and persistence and keep talking about it,” Wong said. And at least one nurse she persuaded to stay for a massage after her shift finished thanked her.

In the end, taking care of herself will translate into better care for her patients, Wong concluded. “Nursing takes a toll physically and emotionally,” she said. “I want to be able to come to work feeling fresh and rejuvenated.”

The Center for Integrative Medicine offers a variety of services, including massage therapy, at a discount to hospital employees. To schedule an appointment, call 720-848-1090.

Burned Out?

Questions on the Zoomerang survey 8 West nurse Stephanie Wong conducted included items designed to measure burnout:

- I deal very effectively with the problems of my patients.
- I feel I treat some patients as if they were impersonal objects.
- I feel very emotionally drained from work.
- I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.
- I’ve become more callous towards people since I took this job.
- I feel I’m positively influencing other people’s lives through my work.
- Working with people all day is really a strain for me.
- I don’t really care what happens to some patients.
- I feel exhilarated after working closely with my patients.
- I think of giving up nursing for another career.
- I reflect on the satisfaction I get from being a nurse.
- I regret my decision to have become a nurse.