Securing the future: retention of older health care workers

Suzanne Hodgkin¹, Jeni Warburton¹
¹La Trobe University

The workforce shortages in the Australian health care system are well documented. These deficiencies are more evident in rural and remote areas of Australia and encompass most health care professions, including doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, and other health workers. In response to a rapidly ageing population, this shortage is likely to increase, placing pressure on the health system. However, while recruitment to rural areas has been a high priority in the past decade, the average tenure for these workers is low. Coupled with the shrinking supply of younger workers, retention of older health care workers will be significant in diverting an imminent rural health care crisis.

Utilising a sequential mixed-methods design, this study explored the factors that affect older employees’ decisions to work within the rural public health care system until traditional retirement age and beyond. The theoretical framework underpinning the research is the effort–reward imbalance (ERI) model, which postulates that strain results when employees perceive an imbalance between work expended and rewards received. In the first stage, survey data was collected from 299 women and men aged over 55 years working as nurses or allied health care professionals within the Hume region in north-east Victoria. Here the relationship between ERI and psychological strain was explored. In the second stage, interviews were undertaken with 18 health care workers from within the original survey cohort to further explore psychosocial factors that may affect retention.

Findings from the first stage confirm that those employees who experience high effort–reward imbalance also experience significantly lower levels of psychological wellbeing. Limited access to rewards associated with financial compensation, esteem and career opportunities were more important to this older cohort of workers. High efforts were also related to psychological strain. Further, qualitative interview data indicated that retention was negatively influenced by both increasing workload pressures and organisational constraints, and feeling valued by the organisation was a key factor in decisions to remain in a current position. Together, both sets of data provide a comprehensive analysis of factors that affect retention rate of older health care workers. These findings provide a basis for considering how governments and rural health care organisations can begin to address current and future rural workforce shortages at an organisational level.