



# Barriers to a Healthy Work Environment: Perspectives of Critical-Care Nurses

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## Introduction & Background

- Healthy nurse work environments (HWEs) are vital for healthcare delivery and high-quality patient care.
- Whereas HWEs are associated with favorable nurse, patient, and organizational outcomes, barriers to a HWE affect these outcomes negatively (Wei et al., 2018).
- The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) identified **six standards for HWEs** and explored them quantitatively (Ulrich et al., 2019):
  - » Skilled Communication
  - » True Collaboration
  - » Effective Decision-Making
  - » Appropriate Staffing
  - » Meaningful Recognition
  - » Authentic Leadership

## Purpose/Aims

To explore critical-care nurses' perceptions of HWE barriers and test their descriptions against the six established AACN-HWE standards.

## Methods

- This qualitative **exploratory study** represented data of critical-care nurses' written responses from an online survey design study (Ulrich et al., 2019) during the pre-COVID-19 era.
- **Participants:** A subsample ( $n = 3,324$ ) of a national sample of  $N = 8,080$  AACN members described a work environment issue in their unit/organization which causes/caused them concern.
- **Inductive conventional content analysis** identified emergent themes; **deductive directed content analysis** tested the data set for consistency with the HWE standards and illustrated exemplars for each theme and subtheme (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

## HWE Barriers Word Cloud



## Results

Code System		13191
➤ HWE Barrier Answers		2999
HWE Barrier Blanks/Not Applicable/Incomprehensible		325
4. BARRIERS TO ADEQUATE STAFFING		2916
6. BARRIERS TO AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP		2184
3. BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE DECISION-MAKING		877
2. BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION		661
1. BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION		597
5. BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL RECOGNITION		398
➤ SPACE, ENVIRONMENT		662
➤ SUPPLIES, EQUIPMENT		333

- **Barriers** identified in the data **were consistent with** and **reflected** all six AACN **HWE standards**.
- The **most prevalent barrier** to HWEs was related to **staffing** ( $n = 2,916$ ) (corresponding to AACN-HWE **Standard #4: appropriate staffing**) which addressed the **subthemes**:
  - inadequate nurse, physician, and ancillary staffing
  - high patient acuity
  - inappropriate nurse workload
  - inexperienced nurses
  - inadequate training/education
  - new graduate nurses leaving
- **Codes not aligning** with the six HWE standards and their descriptions ( $n = 995$ ) **but co-occurring** with **staffing**-related text revolved around:
  - insufficient work supplies/equipment
  - non-working equipment
  - inappropriate workspace
- **Codes not aligning** with the six HWE standards were **not identified** by a **key word search** within the individual definitions and critical elements for each of AACN's HWE standards.

## Exemplar of "Non-Functional Equipment":

"Difficult obtaining working equipment, including **malfunctioning beds, EKG machines** and other equipment. While equipment does sometimes get replaced, a **new policy** was put in place recently that now **when equipment is malfunctioning, especially IT equipment such as computers and medication scanners the nurses are expected to troubleshoot with the equipment to get it to work instead of having IT support available to fix the equipment**. This is along with other patient care responsibilities in an **intensive care unit**. This has resulted in a **delay of fixed equipment, and more medications not being scanned into the MAR as workarounds have been created**. **It seems that every day, more expectations are added to the responsibilities of nursing staff**. This issue has not yet been resolved."

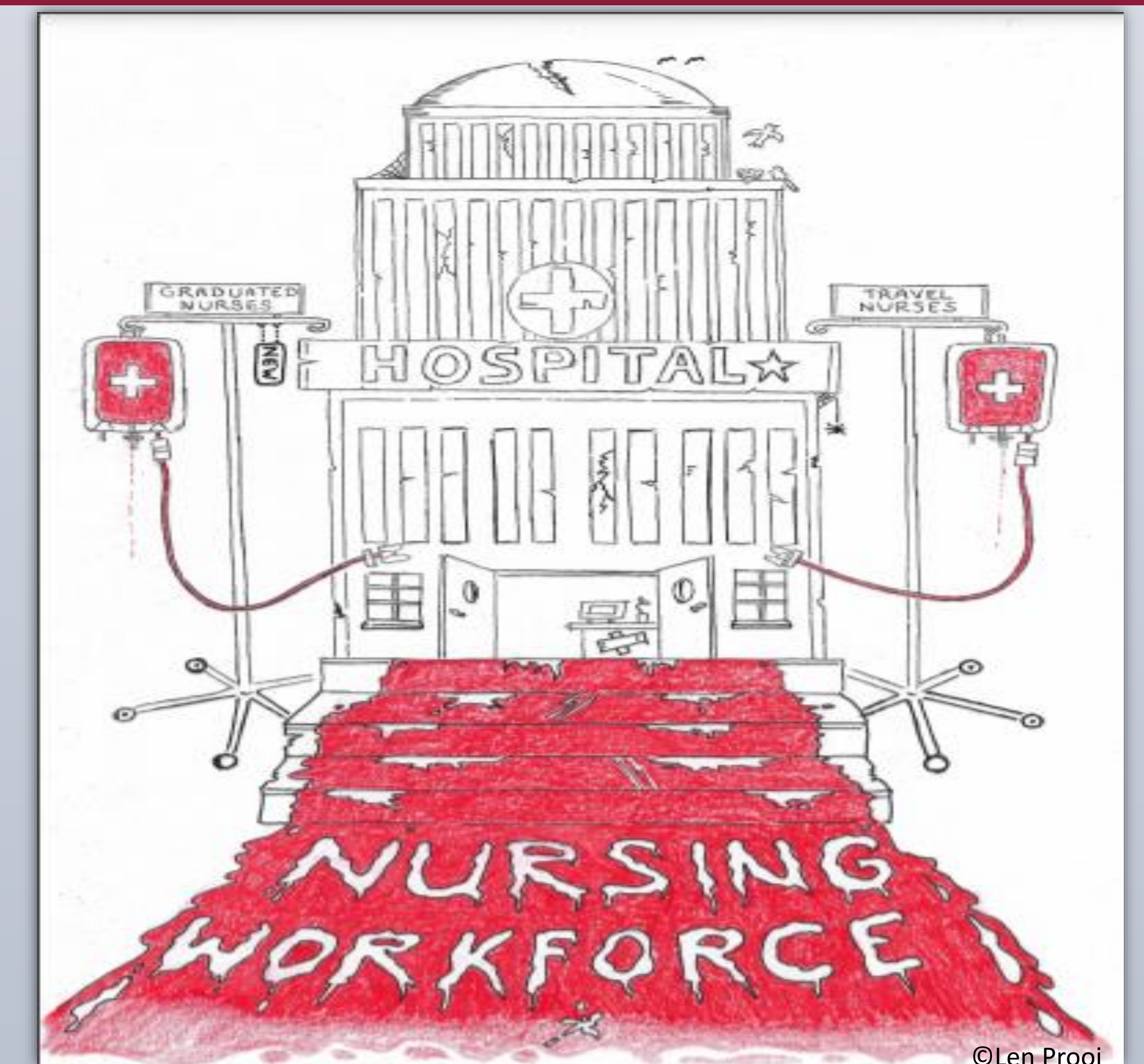
## Conclusions

- The qualitative analysis confirmed **all** six HWE standards and highlighted adequate staffing as a central barrier.
- Additional themes co-occurring with staffing centered on lack of supplies, functional equipment, and inappropriate workspace.
- These factors are necessary preconditions for a healthy work environment – an aspect not yet captured by the six HWE standards.
- These factors compound the staffing problems and may have increased disparities in staffing during COVID-19, thus intensified nurse burnout, and accelerated nurses leaving the workforce.

## Implications

- An ill-equipped, understaffed nurse workforce will struggle to maintain its commitment to safe and quality patient care.
- If not given the resources to be successful, the staffing crisis with its resulting loss of the nursing workforce will not be resolved.
- On a policy level, the linkage between HWE standard 4 and appropriate workspace, equipment, and supplies ought to be recognized.
- To reverse the trend of losing the nursing workforce, healthcare stakeholders and nurse leaders must act quickly to address these compounding factors that are easily overlooked.

## The Nursing Retention Crisis



## Reference

Ulrich, B., Barden, C., Cassidy, L., & Varn-Davis, N. (2019). Critical care nurse work environments 2018: Findings and implications. *Critical Care Nurse*, 39(2), 67-84.

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