

Profile of the Administrative Supervisor: *What Do We Know?*

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Administrative supervisors, the nurse leaders during the evening, night, and weekend shifts, enable hospitals to function 24 hours a day, 7 days a week delivering safe, quality patient care. Although this role has been present for more than 100 years,¹ research on the value of these nurse leaders is just beginning. The uniqueness of this leadership role was uncovered by the primary author during interviews with 30 administrative supervisors who worked in acute

care hospitals in 20 different states. In this qualitative, focused ethnographic study, the role responsibilities and processes by which the supervisors “make it work,” doing whatever is necessary to get the patients, staff, and hospital safely through the night were identified.^{2,3} The profile of the administrative supervisor was also revealed in the interviews: the position title, span of control, reporting relationship, hours worked, and the key skills needed.

BACKGROUND

Despite this long-standing organizational structure across hospitals, there is a paucity of publications on the administrative supervisor role. When searching electronic databases CINAHL, MEDLINE, and PubMed using the terms “night supervisor” and “evening supervisor” and “off-shift management,” primarily descriptive articles were uncovered. In 1956, the American Hospital Association recognized the evening and night supervisor role, and identified staffing and making decisions “on the spot” as key functions of these supervisors.⁴ More recently, evidence was published describing off-shift nursing management, along with one of the first research studies on off-shift management, finding that administrative supervisors have responsibilities for staffing and patient flow, crisis management, and providing support to the staff.⁵⁻⁸

STUDY METHODS

The purpose of this focused ethnographic study, which was conducted in 2 parts, was to explore the administrative supervisors’ perspective of their managerial practices and how these practices contribute to nurse and patient safety. The first part consisted of focus groups with evening and night shift staff registered nurses to identify the administrative supervisors’ role in nurse and patient safety. The second part consisted of in-depth telephone interviews with administrative supervisors to describe their managerial safety practices and role responsibilities. Institutional review board approval was obtained from Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Focus group participants were recruited from hospitals in New Jersey, whereas, through an advertisement placed in the American Organization of Nurse Executives electronic newsletter, administrative supervisors were recruited nationally from different states and different types of hospitals. During in-depth telephone interviews, the supervisors were asked questions, using an interview guide (Table 1), about their managerial safety practices and role responsibilities. The interviews and focus groups continued until data saturation was reached and no new information was emerging.⁹⁻¹¹ Using an inductive, systematic approach, the interview and focus group transcripts and job descriptions, obtained from the administrative supervisors, were thematically analyzed for codes and themes.^{12,13} The purpose of this paper is to report additional findings from this research study, which describes the profile of the administrative supervisor. The primary findings from this research study are reported elsewhere, and describe the overall theme and subthemes of role responsibilities, “make it work,” and nurse and patient safety.^{2,3}

DEMOGRAPHICS

Prior to the start of the interviews, the administrative supervisors provided demographic information, which is summarized in Table 2. The 30 interviewed administrative supervisors ranged in age from 33 to 70 years with an average age of 49.6 years. These supervisors worked in 20 different states at hospitals that were primarily nonprofit (83%) and teaching (77%) hospitals. Eleven hospitals (37%) had the ANCC Magnet designation, and 3 hospitals (10%) had the ANCC Pathway to Excellence designation.

KEY FINDINGS

No Standardization in Position Title

During the evening, night, weekend, and holiday shifts, the nursing leadership team consisting of nursing unit-based managers, directors, and administrators are not typically present in the hospital. The administrative supervisor does not have 24-hour responsibility, but rather has responsibility for all nursing units in the hospital during a given shift (evening or night). Despite the common role responsibilities identified in the recent research, the interviewed administrative supervisors identified 18 different job titles for the role, with house supervisor and administrative supervisor as the most common position titles (Box 1). Early publications described this position by shift, evening and night supervisor, and in the seminal study of Magnet hospitals, staff nurses specifically mentioned evening and night supervisors.^{4,14,15} A common or universal position title for this nurse leader position would be beneficial for organizations, nurses, and patients.

Variable Spans of Control

During the interviews, the majority of administrative supervisors (68%) worked alone, whereas other supervisors worked with 1 or more supervisors during the shift, as shown in Table 3. Not surprisingly, hospitals with more than 500 beds were more likely to have more than 1 administrative supervisor, and there was a statistically significant association ($p = 0.038$, $n = 30$) between the size of the hospital and the number of supervisors.

Span of control for nurse managers is typically measured by the number of employees reporting to the managers, and research has linked scope and span of control with nurse turnover and job satisfaction.¹⁶ There has been no mention in the literature on how best to measure the administrative supervisor span of control. Because administrative supervisors support the evening and night shift staff and work to ensure nurse and patient safety, it is important to consider how best to measure their span of control either by hospital beds or number of employees. Determining this measure for administrative supervisors is of particular significance in that 5 of the 30 interviewed administrative supervisors were the solo supervisor at hospitals that had between 447 and 662 beds.

Administrative Support for Staffing

Staffing is a key role responsibility for administrative supervisors, and encompasses staffing for the current and next shift, covering sick calls, and calling in on-call staff.² Administrative supervisors may have assistance with staffing, either with a regional staffing office or staffing personnel. Of the 30 interviewed administrative supervisors, 8 supervisors (27%) had administrative support for staffing 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, whereas 9 supervisors (30%) did not have staffing assistance for a period of time during the night shift such as from midnight until 4 a.m. As shown in Table 3, there was no statistically significant relationship ($p = 0.093$, $n = 30$) between the size of the hospital and administrative support for staffing.

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