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AUTHORS: Gulbu Tanriverdi

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RURAL NURSING:A NARRATIVE REVIEW

Gülbu TANRIVERDİ¹

¹ Prof. Dr. , Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University Faculty of Health Sciences, Public Health Nursing

Department, Çanakkale, Türkiye

Abstract

This classical review examines the global significance, benefits, and challenges of rural nursing. In addition to delivering care to diverse age groups and addressing a wide range of health concerns, rural nursing also requires providing services in remote areas with limited resources. Nurses' multifaceted knowledge and skills, effective use of technology, and close engagement with the community substantially contribute to maintaining high-quality care in these regions. In doing so, they enhance the well-being of local populations and further global health equity goals. Among the primary advantages of rural nursing are high job satisfaction and strong nurse-patient relationships. However, workforce shortages, long distances, and limited infrastructure pose serious challenges; moreover, an aging workforce threatens the sustainability of rural health services. Innovative community-based approaches and the strengthening of technological infrastructure are also critically important. Prepared to increase awareness of rural nursing, this review underscores the need for improvements in nursing education, support mechanisms, and relevant policies in order to make rural nursing more appealing.

Keywords: Rural nursing, Rural nurses, Rural, Nursing

Özet

Bu klasik derleme, kırsal hemşireliğin küresel ölçekteki önemini, yararlarını ve karşılaşılan zorlukları incelemektedir. Kırsal hemşirelik, farklı yaş gruplarına ve çeşitli sağlık sorunlarına hizmet sunarken, aynı zamanda kaynakların kısıtlı olduğu uzak bölgelerde bakım vermeyi gerektirir. Hemşirelerin çok yönlü bilgi ve becerilere sahip olması, teknolojiyi etkin biçimde kullanması ve toplulukla yakın ilişkiler geliştirmesi, kırsal alanda yüksek hizmet kalitesini sürdürmeye önemli ölçüde katkı sağlar. Bu sayede yerel toplulukların refahına destek olunur ve küresel ölçekte sağlıktaki eşitlik hedefleri ilerletilir. Kırsal hemşirelik uygulamalarının başlıca avantajları arasında yüksek iş tatmini ve hasta-hemşire ilişkilerinin güçlülüğü yer alır. Öte yandan, sağlık çalışanı yetersizliği, uzun mesafeler ve kısıtlı altyapı gibi sorunlar ciddi engeller oluşturur; ayrıca yaşlanan iş gücü, kırsal sağlık hizmetlerinin sürdürülebilirliği açısından tehdit edici bir unsurdur. Yenilikçi toplumsal yaklaşımlar ve teknolojik altyapının güçlendirilmesi de bu alanda kritik öneme sahiptir. Bu derleme, kırsal hemşirelik konusunda farkındalığı artırmak amacıyla hazırlanmış olup, hemşirelik eğitiminin, destek mekanizmalarının ve ilgili politikaların geliştirilerek kırsal hemşireliğin daha cazip hale getirilmesi gerektiğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Kırsal hemşirelik, Kırsal hemşireler, Kırsal, Hemşirelik

ORCID ID: G.T 0000-0002-2728-5945

Corresponding Author: Gülbu Tanrıverdi, Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University Faculty of Health Sciences, Public Health Nursing Department. Çanakkale, Türkiye

E-mail: gulbu@comu.edu.tr

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INTRODUCTION

Rural nursing is a specialized field that provides quality and comprehensive care to individuals, families, and communities living in rural areas (1,2). This specialty requires nurses to be highly competent and prepared in all aspects of professional practice. Rural nursing can exemplify the essence of what nursing should be (1). However, as a specialty, rural nursing is not sufficiently understood within the policies that govern the nursing profession and nursing practices, and its professional identity is often questioned and faces challenges. Over the past 20 years, it has been noted that rural nurses are not only misunderstood by other health professionals, employers, and policymakers but also by other nurses (2).

Investing in nurses is an investment in families, communities, countries, and the world (3). Nurses are the largest professional group in healthcare services and play a critical role in providing rural care (4). They coordinate services in remote and rural areas and act as intermediaries among other health professionals. Therefore, a shortage of nursing staff can remove the glue that holds remote and rural communities together, adversely affecting the quality of care (4). Rural nurses, who work in regions with widespread social inequalities, address a wide range of health issues, from chronic diseases to substance abuse, and serve a broad age group from infants to the elderly, often employing advanced collaboration and technology (5). Due to the significant diversity among rural communities, generalizing about the health needs of those living in these areas is difficult. These nurses are richly equipped with resilience, resourcefulness, and creativity (6). Rural nurses play a vital role in managing various health issues and transferring patients to larger facilities, working with a deep commitment to their community and developing profound relationships with their patients (7).

Nurses are crucial in fulfilling the promise of leaving no one behind and

contributing to the global effort to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. They make central contributions to national and global targets related to various health priorities, including universal health coverage, mental health and non-communicable diseases, emergency preparedness and response, patient safety, and the delivery of person-centered care. The report developed in partnership with the World Health Organization and the International Council of Nurses is a significant example highlighting the global value of the nursing workforce (8). The shortage of healthcare professionals in rural areas leads to poor health status and difficulties in accessing healthcare services. Nurses, as primary healthcare providers, have been identified as a potential solution to the shortage of primary healthcare providers (9). However, the number of rural nurses is decreasing, and adequate support is not being provided (5).

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that approximately two billion people living in rural areas worldwide lack access to adequate healthcare services. One of the leading factors contributing to this global shortage is the lack of healthcare workers, including nurses. While nearly half of the global population lives in rural areas, only 36% of the global nursing workforce works in rural contexts (10). There are still significant disparities in the distribution of nurses globally (8). This issue is particularly critical in rural and remote communities. Attracting nurses to less populated areas presents different challenges compared to urban areas (11). The current rural nursing workforce is insufficient to meet the healthcare needs of the rural population. This insufficiency is likely to worsen as statistical trends indicate that rural and remote communities may be among the worst affected by the global nursing shortage. The nursing profession exhibits an uneven distribution between urban and rural areas worldwide. The number of registered nurses per capita is higher in urban areas compared to rural regions. Other countries, such as the

United States and Canada, also experience a decline in the number of healthcare professionals in rural areas, highlighting the inequalities in healthcare access for rural communities (12). This classical review aims to raise awareness of rural nursing among nurses, policymakers, and local governments based on the literature.

Advantages of Rural Nursing

Rural nursing is a unique field of practice worldwide. Nurses need a broad range of knowledge and skills and often work with high autonomy under limited resources. They face challenges such as long travel distances, staff shortages, increased workload, lack of flexibility, and limited career development opportunities (12). Nurses in this field provide care to various age groups and integrate with other health disciplines through interprofessional collaboration. Their flexibility enhances their ability to work efficiently with limited resources. Additionally, rural nursing offers opportunities for community involvement and developing closer relationships with patients. However, they may also face challenges like gender role expectations. Creative use of resources and achieving a respected status in the community are additional benefits (13). Research indicates that rural nurses report high job satisfaction and enjoy the rural lifestyle (14). A study conducted in the Northwestern United States involving 103 rural hospital nurses examined job satisfaction and intent to stay, revealing that rural nurses generally prefer the rural lifestyle and wish for this lifestyle to be incorporated into organizational practices. Nurses intending to leave their jobs were typically unmarried, childless, and did not prefer rural living. Nurses with 1-3 years of experience reported lower satisfaction rates (15).

Disadvantages of Rural Nursing

Research also indicates that rural nurses experience mental health issues and burnout. The average age of rural nurses is high, exacerbating the workforce crisis. Individuals with rural living experience are more likely to

choose to work in this field (14). Rural nursing involves challenges not found in urban and suburban areas, affecting nursing care, the profession, and individual development. A clear definition is needed to understand rural nursing. Nursing leaders and educators must work to overcome the challenges of rural nursing and embrace the opportunities it offers (16). Research on the rural nursing workforce highlights the high turnover rates among new or novice rural nurses. Recruitment and retention of staff are among the biggest challenges in this field (17). Nurses in this field may also face challenges such as gender role expectations (13).

Rural Nursing Workforce

Most rural nurses work in rural hospitals, community health settings, and care homes. Typically, at least one physician is on call in or near the town. Nurses working in smaller rural hospitals have a role described as "generalist specialists," requiring them to possess and be competent in a wide range of nursing and non-nursing practices (18). The education, recruitment, and retention of nurses in rural areas are critical issues. Innovative strategies use technology to offer educational opportunities to nurses in rural areas. Financial incentives and various initiatives from federal/national, state/provincial, and regional governments encourage nurses to work in rural areas. Telecommunications, telehealth, and biotechnology are increasing in rural areas (6). The stories of rural nurses can raise awareness among nurses and the broader audience and influence future policies and actions (2). Research on the rural nursing workforce has identified high turnover rates among new or novice rural nurses, especially concerning recruitment and retention. Significant legislative changes and nurse-led care models are crucial for populations living in rural, regional, and remote areas. Since these areas face barriers to accessing healthcare services, nurse-led models play a significant role in healthcare (17). An ethnographic study conducted in rural hospitals in Australia aimed to examine the roles of rural nurses in

resuscitation processes. The findings indicated that rural nurses successfully perform in various roles in dynamic environments. The research highlights the importance of strategies aimed at developing leadership skills in resuscitation processes among rural nurses, contributing to an effective and robust workforce in rural healthcare (19). A mixed-methods study conducted in Pokhara, Nepal, to evaluate the intentions of final-year nursing students to work in rural areas and identify motivating and deterring factors associated with these intentions, found that about one-third (33.3%) of the participants considered working in rural areas. Motivating factors for increasing the intention to work in rural areas included career advancement opportunities, proximity to family, high salary/incentives, and high healthcare needs in rural areas. Detering factors included separation from family and friends, lack of recreational facilities, inadequate salary/incentives, lack of equipment and resources, low use of skills and knowledge, and low self-efficacy perceptions (20).

Rural Nursing Education

Many new graduate nurses are not sufficiently prepared for rural nursing practice due to limited exposure to rural nursing content in educational programs. Increasing learning opportunities for nursing students in rural clinical settings will likely support the recruitment and retention of nurses in rural practice. Despite the key role of rural nursing education in maintaining the rural healthcare workforce, little is known about rural clinical learning in nursing education (12). Existing evidence points to the importance of creating a pathway to nursing careers in remote and rural areas through nursing education. Promoting the adoption of nursing programs in remote and rural areas and supporting the transition from secondary to higher education are crucial for successfully developing this pathway (4). Rural nursing education plays a critical role in reducing the healthcare personnel shortage in rural and remote areas worldwide. However, many nursing students do not sufficiently

benefit from rural clinical experiences, negatively affecting their preparation for rural nursing practice and recruitment processes (12). Introducing students to the rural environment helps meet the need for healthcare professionals in these areas (6). The Australian government, through its investment in rural health departments at universities, aims to provide high-quality education to students who will work in rural areas. The Australian Government's National Rural and Remote Nursing General Framework 2023-2027 identifies the skills needed by rural nurses and provides guidance for future curricula. Government policy initiatives offer incentive payments to final-year students to complete placements in rural and remote areas (14). In Australia, there is an emphasis on postgraduate education regarding the educational preparation needed for rural nursing practices. However, most nurses in rural areas do not have postgraduate qualifications and face significant barriers to obtaining them. While much of the literature argues that postgraduate preparation is vital for rural nursing practice, it suggests that the future rural nursing workforce will be recruited from undergraduate courses at regional universities. However, there is a need for special theoretical and practical preparation in undergraduate education to facilitate the transition of nurses to rural practice (21). In Canada, rural nursing education is insufficient, and programs that include rural and remote nursing topics are limited. More research and policy support are needed to develop this nursing field (5).

How to Make Rural Nursing Attractive?

Suggestions from the literature to make rural nursing attractive include:

- ✚ *Job Satisfaction and Lifestyle:* Highlighting the job satisfaction of rural nurses and the rural lifestyle (14).
- ✚ *Education:* Improving rural nursing education and providing incentives for rural placements (21).
- ✚ *Support and Incentives:* Offering financial incentives, professional

support, and career development opportunities (13).

✚ *Policy Initiatives:* Implementing policies to support rural nurses and address challenges specific to rural healthcare (6).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Rural nursing is a specialized and essential field that requires nurses to be versatile, resourceful, and dedicated to their communities. Despite the challenges, rural nurses find great job satisfaction and contribute significantly to the health and well-being of rural populations. Enhancing education, support, and policies for rural nurses is crucial for addressing the global nursing shortage and ensuring high-quality healthcare in rural areas.

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Competing interests

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