

Finding the Right Balance in Nurses' Sickness Presenteeism

Dear Editor,

Sickness presenteeism refers to the act of showing up at work while unable to safely participate in work-related activities due to an acute or ongoing health issue.^[1] Despite its potential burdens, presenteeism continues to generate conversation regarding finding the right balance.

Nursing has one of the highest rates of presenteeism, four times that of other occupations.^[2] There are several reasons why nurses go to work despite being in poor physical or mental health, including high work demands, lack of adequate replacement, and a lack of consideration from coworkers. But is sickness presenteeism the way forward? Among the professional concerns associated with presenteeism is the sustainability of healthcare, as it can threaten long-term health and increase the likelihood of future absenteeism due to accelerated health decline. In addition, there is concern for patient safety because these nurses are at greater risk from workplace accidents and are more likely to engage in clinical errors.^[3]

Moreover, there is the potential risk of burdening the coworkers. The demanding nature of the nursing profession necessitates that nurses navigate complex situations while caring for patients. As a result, coworkers have the right to expect professionals with whom they collaborate to be dependable and effective team members. It is uncertain, however, whether this is always viable, given that workplace incapacity does not guarantee dependability.

Nevertheless, presenteeism is not necessarily always detrimental and undesirable. Human resources remain a priority due to the heavy workload and limited workforce.^[4] However, nurse managers must refrain from penalizing staff who require time off due to health concerns. In addition to finding a replacement immediately, they must actively discourage presenteeism. To encourage a resilient workforce and reduce future absenteeism and presenteeism, it is central that managers consider multiple factors, such as schedule flexibility and optimal workload, in managing safe staffing.^[5] Unavoidable presenteeism should also be consistently monitored to balance advantages and burdens for all parties. Striking an optimal harmony in sickness presenteeism generally requires consideration of the health and safety of patients and healthcare professionals and an appropriate burden-benefit ratio.

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Conflicts of interest

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