Practice Nurses’ quality of life

How is your work/life balance these days? Did you just snort in total exasperation?!

LISA NOLAN

Nursing journals, research, blogs and all those on the front line of healthcare are increasingly referring to the fact that nurses and other healthcare professionals are at breaking point. HCPs burned out, working harder than ever, doing longer hours but earning less, seeing exasperated patients who have been waiting for longer than usual, often not having enough time to provide nursing care as thoroughly as they’d like.

Recent statistics from Scotland show that Practice Nurse consultations now account for 30% of all consultations in general practice there.¹ There are 16 million consultations every year in general practices in Ireland.² If the Scottish statistics were applied here, then Practice Nurses in Ireland could be carrying out 4,800,000 consultations per year. First of all — wow. Secondly — yikes! No wonder a Google search of Nurse Burnout yields millions of results.
Sleep deprivation can impair job performance and increase risk for worker errors and injuries. Errors made by fatigued healthcare workers also can endanger patients.

The well-documented increase in general practice workloads over the past 5 years means that Practice Nurses, just like their colleagues in secondary care, are now working at full speed throughout the day. Most Practice Nurses, by the nature of the experience required to do their job, have families. So we can assume you are all racing home from surgeries to multi-task there as well. Juggling work and family commitments was difficult enough during the Celtic Tiger era, but reduced incomes mean that now we are also trying to do more tasks ourselves to make ends meet; cooking every night of the week to avoid the cost of a takeaway; cutting the grass ourselves instead of paying the local lawnmower-owning budding entrepreneurs to do it. I’m sure you could add lots to this list yourself.

While constantly lauded as an essential skill for most jobs, multi-tasking constantly all day every day, at work and at home, is only effective if it’s productive. If you feel that you are meeting yourself coming back, that you are becoming chronically sleep deprived, have stopped exercising, have to scramble around the ironing pile looking for clean clothes or are opting for convenience food most days of the week – it’s time to stop and think.

Adequate sleep, eating well, exercising and enjoying life with family are ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL to life. These are the things that provide the physical, mental and emotional nourishment we need to work and be productive, but they are often the things we tend to cut back on when work and other responsibilities take over. When we do this for too long, work becomes harder or less productive and, worse still, our health and well-being deteriorates – so cutting back on sleep and leisure time achieves absolutely nothing.

Practice Nurses take every opportunity to promote healthy living to their patients, but tend to neglect themselves. As nurses are trained to seek out evidence, below are some research findings that might help remind you to take your own advice!

A recent study of neonatologists stated that the researchers’ findings ‘are similar to physicians’ feelings that their work prevents their having leisure time and emphasizes the importance of leisure time in maintaining a good quality of life. Engaging in leisure time activities, such as spending time with one’s family and friends, and being engaged in physical activities, can prevent burnout.”

Even more seriously, “Sleep deprivation can impair job performance and increase risk for worker errors and injuries. Errors made by fatigued healthcare workers also can endanger patients.”

So, for your sake and for those who depend on you, take a few minutes now to plan some changes (however small) to make a difference; to help you rearrange your life, refocus your priorities, ensure you allocate enough time for the good things in life or whatever you need to ensure the perfect balance for you.

Take action now!
There is a vast array of websites and online resources offering time management tools. Most offer very useful tips, but this one can be done right now, as you are reading this, without having to log on to the internet. And it will only take 5 minutes!
1. Get a pen and paper and actually write down what you do every day. Everything. This includes sleeping, eating, exercising, showering, commuting, work, housework, etc.
2. Sort this list in order of importance.
3. Allocate a specific amount of time for the essentials.
4. Don’t forget that leisure time is essential! You would mark a dental appointment in your calendar. Mark time in your diary to have a walk, catch up with an old friend, or to sit in an armchair with a book. I’m a big fan of the ‘free’ stuff, like spending 15 minutes lying outside on the grass beside your kids to spot shapes in the clouds. Doesn’t cost a cent, means so much to them and goes a small way towards protecting your mental health. Set aside the time for these and don’t stand yourself up or back out of your arrangement with yourself!
5. Allow some time every day and week for the unexpected, because life is life and emergencies happen.
6. Ruthlessly, (and I mean RUTHLESSLY!) identify the pointless things that steal your time and aren’t productive. Delegate these if you can afford to.
7. Relegate if you can’t.

Remember, life is short and graveyards are full of ‘indispensable’ people. Now is the moment to stop and take a breath.

References
1. General Practice – GP workforce and practice population statistics to 2012, Information Services Division Scotland. www.idsscotland.org (direct link is on IPNA website, Research page)
2. Primary Care: A New Direction, Department of Health & Children http://www.dohc.ie/publications/fulltext/primary_care_new_direction/part_two.html