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Night nurses from across New York state celebrate their hard work



The night nurse

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“While everyone is getting up in the morning, we’re going to sleep.”



Remy Jamisolemin, RN, Montefiore Medical Center

Sijjad Khan, RN, is an ER night nurse at Brooklyn Hospital and knows how important his job is. “No one can predict when someone will get sick. I’m proud to be there when our patients need us the most.”

It’s not a job for everyone, but those who step up to the task are truly exceptional: consummate leaders and unwavering patient caregivers who are able to do more with less.

A night nurse’s clinical skills must be tip-top, as they are often the first and last line of defense. Their ability to multi-task is stretched to the extreme and yet they persevere, their compassion for patients on clear display.

While the rest of us sleep, night nurses go above and beyond the call of duty, keeping our families, loved ones, and patients safe in preparation for another New York day.

The job is certainly not without its challenges.

Working the night shift means interrupting natural sleep and

social schedules, missing out on important daytime activities, bearing added responsibility with fewer staff, and making sure to stay alert and safe.

“We have to function differently because when nighttime comes, that’s when we are at our best,” said Lisa Collins-Samuel, RN, Brooklyn Hospital. “What we see at night is different. Not everyone can do the night shift. We tend to have less

people, but we always make it work in our own unique way.”

The job

While a night nurse’s responsibilities and duties vary only slightly from her day nurse colleagues, adjustments have to be made to account for a smaller, overnight workforce.

During the day, there are countless administrators on duty. Every



Panelists discuss the challenges of night nursing at NYSNA's 2017 Convention



Many RNs joined the workshop after finishing a long night shift at their hospitals

Our union is important because we know we aren’t really alone.

The union makes sure we have our voices and concerns heard, especially since management isn’t often around when our problems come up.”

Cynthia Pilat, RN,
Erie County Medical Center

ing to sleep.”

unit has a manager on the floor, and all the service departments are fully staffed.

At night, it's the nurses who really run things. Often, there are no unit managers. At most facilities, one to three supervisors cover an entire hospital, with a nurse on every unit taking charge for a 12-hour shift. All the administrative work of running a floor—handling visitors, admissions, discharges, care coordination, patient transport—falls on the night nursing team. And when an emergency happens, night shift RNs have to do more with less, working with skeletal service and technical crews to alert off-site doctors and get patients the care they need and deserve.

“Being a night nurse teaches you to trust your instincts more,” said Lea Nason, RN, of Westchester Medical Center. “Sometimes you’re the only one there to make sure nothing goes wrong.”

Half of a hospital's 24-hour work cycle primarily relies on nurses as the only on-site clinical experts.

All this while operating on little sleep.

Safety and health risks

Kings County Hospital nurse Patricia James, RN, works an eight-hour shift starting at 4 p.m. and ending around 12:30 a.m. Twice a week, she works a double shift and then attends NYSNA meetings. Many nights, Patricia says she's lucky to get three hours of sleep.

At the end of a long shift, night nurses need to rest. But sleeping during the day can be difficult.

According to The World Health Organization, nighttime shift work can take a real toll on the body. The repeated disruption of the body's circadian rhythm makes night workers more susceptible to safety



Roxana Silva, RN, Northwell Health System/Staten Island University Hospital-North

and health challenges. Studies have found a correlation between night shift workers and sleep deprivation, workplace injury, heart disease, musculoskeletal disorders, obesity, impaired glucose tolerance, and decreased insulin sensitivity.

“The lack of sleep is the most difficult part. Very seldom do we get enough sleep,” said Remy Jamisolamin, RN, at Montefiore Medical Center. “I have hypertension, diabetes and arthritis, and I don’t want my night shift hurting my health.”

The American Journal of Preventative Medicine followed 75,000 female registered nurses in the U.S. for 22 years and found that 11 percent who worked rotating night shifts experienced a shortened lifespan. Risk of death by cardiovascular disease jumped 19% for nurses who worked this way for six to 14 years, and increased another 23% in nurses who worked 15 years or more.

“While everyone sleeps, we are working,” said Roxana Silva, RN, at Northwell Health System/Staten Island University Hospital-North. “Until now, I’ve never had any health issues but since I started as a night nurse four years ago, I’ve noticed my health falter.”

Just getting home from work after a long night can be a challenge. According to one study, 56% of night nurses were found to be sleep deprived, and one in 10 said they have had a car accident that they believe was related to fatigue.

The potential for violent incidents to occur also increases on the

night shift. Because most hospital staff are off duty, visitors roam more freely, fewer staff are present to answer questions, patients can become agitated, security staff is limited, and risks are elevated.

Safe staffing

Though bed capacity remains the same, many floors also run with lower RN staffing at night.

“Short staffing is a real, daily problem,” said Collins-Samuel.

“It can be a lot more difficult at night due to the availability of resources,” said Sijjad, whose shift runs from 7 p.m. to 7:30 a.m.

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Yasmine Beasejour, RN, LIJ Valley Stream Northwell and NYSNA Board Member



Being a night nurse teaches you to trust your instincts more. Sometimes you're the only one there to make sure nothing goes wrong.”

Lea Nason, RN,
Westchester
Medical Center



Mercy Mathai, RN, Queens Hospital Center

Night nurse

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“At night, it’s just us and we have to do the best we can with what we have.”

A critical fight

While NYSNA has fought to achieve and won equal RN staffing on day and night shifts in many recent contracts, there is still a persistent myth that units need fewer nurses at night. Ending the shift staffing disparity remains an absolutely critical fight.

Overnight organizing

In many facilities, job openings are often on the night shift. In some cases, newer nurses will fill the night shifts. Nurse educators and clinical specialists work the day-shift, leaving a mentorship void for newer nurses. Given the scant resources on the night shift, many who would want to mentor and precept young nurses get overwhelmed with their own duties.

The hours can also make it difficult to join in union activity. “Because we’re working, night nurses often miss out on union meetings, conferences, and even photo shoots,” said Mercy Mathai, RN, of Queens Hospital Center. “We have to take a day off in order to attend events. It’s important for us to be seen and to remind every-



Kesha James, RN, Queens Hospital Center

one that we matter and to have our needs considered.”

Thanks to nurses like Sijjad, who serves on the Executive Committee at Brooklyn Hospital, NYSNA members keep each other up-to-date and engage in the work of building our union’s strength day and night.

“I am a resource for them,” Sijjad said of the 250 night nurses he represents as a union delegate. “The day shift finds out about things that aren’t passed on to us. I make my rounds to update members and to address member issues and concerns.”

Solidarity after dark

Veteran night nurses have picked up a few survival tricks along the

way: blackout drapes and earplugs for sleep during daylight hours; chamomile tea and reading before bed; carving out quality time with family and friends; making good food choices to combat lethargy; setting aside personal time to mentally recharge; and sticking to a schedule even on days off.

Most of all, nightshift RNs rely on co-worker camaraderie.

“Good, bad and different, we are a family,” said Collins-Samuel. “We hang out together; we work together; we get through the shift together; and we get close. I love my night nurses. I would never trade my job for any other in the world.”

Through it all, night shift nurses keep New York’s hospitals going.

