Counterbalancing work-related stress? Work engagement among intensive care professionals

van Mol, Margo M. C.; Nijkamp, Marjan D.; Bakker, Jan; Schaufeli, Wilmar B.; Kompanje, Erwin J. O.

Abstract

Background and objectives
Working in an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) is increasingly complex and is also physically, cognitively and emotionally demanding. Although the negative emotions of work-related stress have been well studied, the opposite perspective of work engagement might also provide valuable insight into how these emotional demands may be countered. This study focused on the work engagement of ICU professionals and explored the complex relationship between work engagement, job demands and advantageous personal resources.

Methods
This was a cross-sectional survey study among ICU professionals in a single-centre university hospital. Work engagement was measured by the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, which included items about opinions related to the respondent’s work environment. Additionally, 14 items based on the Jefferson Scale of Physician Empathy were included to measure empathic ability. A digital link to the questionnaire was sent in October 2015 to a population of 262 ICU nurses and 53 intensivists.

Results
The overall response rate was 61% (n = 193). Work engagement was negatively related both to cognitive demands among intensivists and to emotional demands among ICU nurses. No significant relationship was found between work engagement and empathic ability; however, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability were highly correlated with work engagement. Only the number of hours worked per week remained as a confounding factor, with a negative effect of workload on work engagement after controlling for the effect of weekly working hours.

Conclusion
Work engagement counterbalances work-related stress reactions. The relatively high workload in ICUs, coupled with an especially heavy emotional burden, may be acknowledged as an integral part of ICU work. This workload does not affect the level of work engagement, which was high for both intensivists and nurses despite the known high job demands. Specific factors that contribute to a healthy and successful work life among ICU professionals need further exploration.
Keywords
Empathy, ICU professionals, Personality, Well-being, Work engagement, Work-related stress.