



The role and value of professional memberships for emergency nurses: What are the key elements?

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Abstract

Purpose: To describe international trends in engaging with professional nursing associations with a focus on emergency nurses, including varying levels of experience, years of service, and demographics.

Design: A cross-sectional, descriptive Web-based survey was distributed in July 2022 to members of the Emergency Nurses Association, social media platforms, and forums with worldwide reach to emergency nurses.

Method: A qualitative online survey, which included quantitative questions to establish elements, such as age or nationality.

Findings: 172 surveys responses were received with 9 countries represented in the data. The findings showed that a large percentage of respondents (64.3%) are engaged in a clinical healthcare setting, with 59.8% of respondents reporting having worked in emergency nursing for 15 years or more. 94.1% of respondents identified as having an active emergency nursing organization membership, whilst 56.7% also identified as holding other non-emergency nursing professional memberships. The main drivers for benefits of joining a professional organization was for professional development (76.9%) and networking with like-minded colleagues (69.8%).

Conclusions: Emergency nurses seek professional membership with organizations for collegiality, professional

development, self-improvement, and to influence the profession. Of the survey respondents approximately two thirds are prepared to invest between \$100–\$500 annually to engage with a professional organization. What is apparent is the newest generation to the emergency nursing workforce is very under-represented in membership data, this opens a great opportunity for organizations to develop targeted campaigns that strengthen the emergency nursing profession.

Keywords: emergency nurse, membership, professional association, engagement

Introduction

Granovetter (1973) wrote on the 'Strength of Weak Ties', even though published all those years ago, there was value and recognition placed on the strength of smaller group interactions and how they can impact on more macro level patterns, the same sociological theory holds true today. There is strength in professional memberships, whether they are conducted on a small or large scale. They are powerful vessels for nurses to have impactful interactions. We recognise that professional memberships for nursing are available globally, whether that is through a local, national, or international organization. They offer a broad range of opportunities including education, bursaries, conferences, networking, self-improvement, self-awareness, and leadership opportunities. They are seen to connect and engage with peers and in some countries professional organizations also drive change, politically lobby, or even offer professional indemnity insurance or union support. Specialty certification is key in establishing professional credibility, increased earning potential, and to boost efficiency in the workplace (Kourkouta et al. 2021). Despite a strong presence in nursing professional organizations, anecdotal evidence

shows that membership is declining or staying stagnant, and it is growing more difficult to bring nurses together through these channels. If we review international organizations such as the Canadian National Emergency Nurses Association (NENA), as of October 2022 there is a reported membership base of 1,066 members. NENA reports that this membership has remained relevantly stagnant over recent years. Likewise, according to the College of Emergency Nurses Australasia (CENA)'s annual general report from June 2022, they have 1,603 members. Again, this figure has remained stagnant in recent years. Relative to country size, including size of the emergency nursing workforce in each respective country, emergency nursing professional membership engagement is extremely low in Canada and Australia. So, the question must be asked, 'Why do nurses not strongly engage with professional organizations?' This study focuses on emergency nurses to gain a greater understanding of drivers for professional membership and engagement.

Literature review

A review of the relevant literature shows that most associations report a stagnant or declining membership despite efforts to increase their memberships. After a review of the literature through a search using key words, such as nursing, emergency, membership, limited articles were found related to emergency nursing professional membership and engagement. According to Whitney & Gale (2015) the key ingredients to sustainability of professional organizations is enduring partnerships and leadership. These can be achieved through professional development, networking, mentorship, and advocacy opportunities. Esmaili et al., (2013) presents a qualitative study review which shows some of the factors that may impact membership. Those factors include opportunity for knowledge gain, advocacy for professional standards, skill enhancement, and increased professionalism. Farhan (2021) also writes that a professional organization encourages members to stay linked to current education and up-to-date, evidence-based practice. Transparency was also noted as a priority for the professional organization. The limitations noted by Esmaili et al. (2013) is that the study was a small sample size and had only urban participants. The recommendation was a larger study be conducted with broader representation. According to Johnson (2019), collaboration is the key when trying to ensure willing-

ness of participants committing to join. There will be no success in goal outcomes if everyone has their own agenda or ideas they want to work toward, however if the foundation of relationships set in professional organizations is trust, there can be success in gaining and maintaining members. According to Cline et al. (2019), professional memberships provide opportunities for growth through continuing education and keeping current on evidence-based practice guidelines. Nurse membership increases participation and may help influence health care policies

and practice. White et al. (2004) also writes and supports other literature and research that the benefits of membership include networking, skill development, education, and that to date there has been limited research related to membership in professional organizations, which leaves little resources to reflect on issues. The European Society of Cardiology (ESC) in 2017 implemented an initiative where if you are a professional member, you receive substantial discounts to attend the annual conference that is equal to the cost of the annual membership (Taylor, 2017). On the ESC website, professional members are given access to free resources and online sessions for continuous professional development. This initiative highlights one organizations initiative to drive value and encourage professional collegiality through membership. Many nurses hold multiple professional organization memberships, potentially due to gaps in offerings in some organizations, limitations in opportunities, as well as indemnity insurance capabilities (Cline et al., 2019).

Results

Method

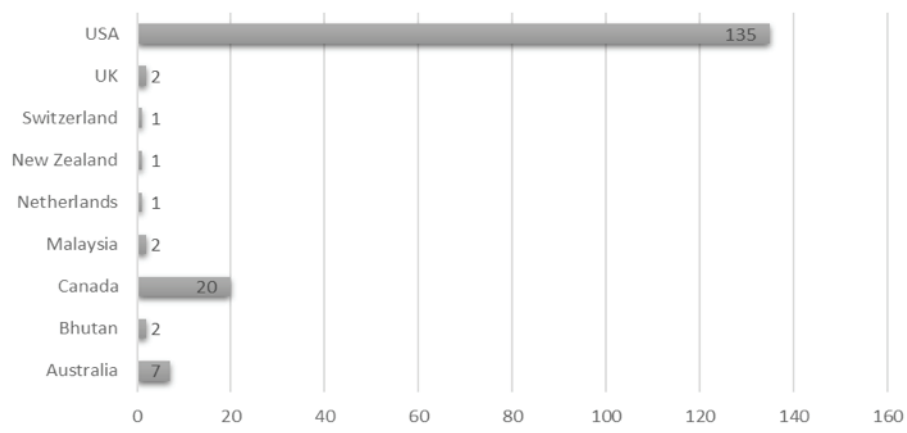
A qualitative survey was developed by the authors, which addressed key components of member engagement. This was to gain a greater understanding, particularly of emergency department (ED) nurses' engagement, with professional organizations as well as quantitative data, such as residency, and age demographics. The survey was tested with a small sample group of 10 ED nurses and further refinements made. A total of 402 invitations were distributed utilizing an international emergency nursing social media group. Of these, 172 nurses/responses were received, or a reported response rate of 43%. The sample methodology of Purposive Sampling was applied, and the authors acknowledge the element of volunteer bias in the research, and that it may not necessarily be representative of all ED nurses.

Descriptive data

The participants were not asked to identify their gender, with most respondents identifying between the ages of 41–60 years old (48.8%). Table 1 represents the distribution of respondents related to the identified country of residence and nursing practice. The percentage of nurses who identified living in the United States of America contributed to the largest numbers

Table 1

Country of Residence and Nursing Practice



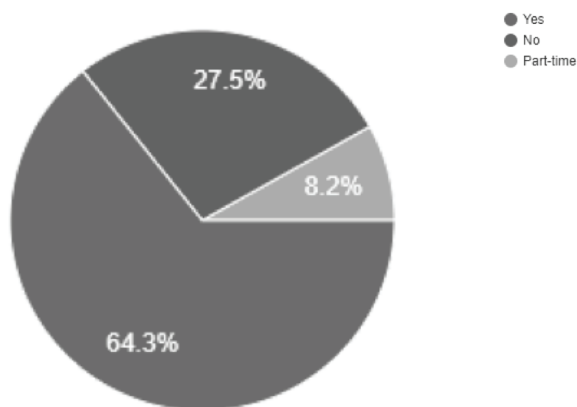
of respondents, 78.9%. The next largest group of respondents identified as residing and practising in Canada, 11.6%, and the remaining respondents, 9.5%, identified from a further seven countries internationally.

Further questions were asked to gain a greater understanding and evaluate the respondent's working situation. The researchers placed value in this data set to understand if professional membership was linked to emergency nurses who were predominantly actively working in a clinical setting. The reasoning to this question was to understand and evaluate what percentage of emergency nurses would value professional membership related to their clinical practice environment. On evaluation of current working arrangements, the data showed 64.3% reported working in a clinical healthcare setting, whilst 27.4% reported no longer working in a clinical capacity. These results confirmed the researcher's hypothesis that there was a larger percentage of respondents who engaged in professional membership as it related to their current clinical practising status. It was surprising to see over one-quarter of respondents who maintained a professional membership despite not currently practicing in emergency nursing. The evaluation of this data could reflect that nurses move into varied other areas of nursing, outside of a healthcare setting who wish to maintain up-to-date, evidence-based education and knowledge. With this it is encouraging to see that emergency nurses wish to stay engaged with their profession.

Figure 1

Are you currently practicing as an emergency nurse in a healthcare setting?

171 responses



The following data presented in Figure 2 and Table 2 sought to gain information around emergency nurse's behaviour and current membership in emergency nursing specific professional organisations. The general question to survey respondents was to capture if they were a current and active member of an emergency nursing professional organization. The survey established that 94% of respondents belonged to a professional organization. According to Cline (2019) professional memberships provide opportunities for growth through continuing education and keeping current on evidence-based practice guidelines. Nurse membership increases participation in education and research and may help influence healthcare policies and practice. Advocacy can also be a significant driver for

professional membership and engagement. This can be demonstrated through opportunities to highlight key issues internationally, for example violence against healthcare workers or critical workforce shortages, where there is strength through the voice of global emergency nursing organizations, such as Emergency Nursing Association (ENA), College of Emergency Nursing Australasia (CENA) or the National Emergency Nurses Association (NENA).

Figure 2

Are you a member of an emergency nursing professional organization? (eg. ENA, EUSEN, CEN, CENA)

170 responses



This question was further expanded to understand the range of organizations identified and if respondents reported membership in one or more emergency nursing organizations. Only nine respondents reported being a member of one professional organization, the remaining 162 respondents identified as holding multiple professional memberships. Table 2 is the extensive list of all nursing professional organizations identified by respondents in the qualitative survey. In total there were 29 organizations identified by respondents with the largest percentage of membership identified as the Emergency Nurses Association. The researchers were very interested in this data, as it showed that emergency nurses in particular value or have a necessity to hold multiple professional memberships. This could be related to the nature of this speciality; whereby emergency nurses may also be a member of a trauma society that is relevant for their clinical practice.

A further point of clarification was asked of respondents, this was if they also held any professional memberships in non-emergency nursing focused organizations. We felt this information was important to understand what the value of other memberships had on their emergency nurse professional membership. Of the 168 respondents to this question 57.1% identified as holding a non-emergency nursing focused professional organization membership. This may be related to certifications of emergency nurses in the international context, such as an Emergency Nurse Practitioner who may hold professional membership with an emergency nurse's association and a nurse practitioner association.

To strengthen the understanding of professional membership engagement, there was a need to get a greater insight of the financial commitment at an individual level. The data shows that nearly half (45.5%) of respondents do not invest more than

Table 2

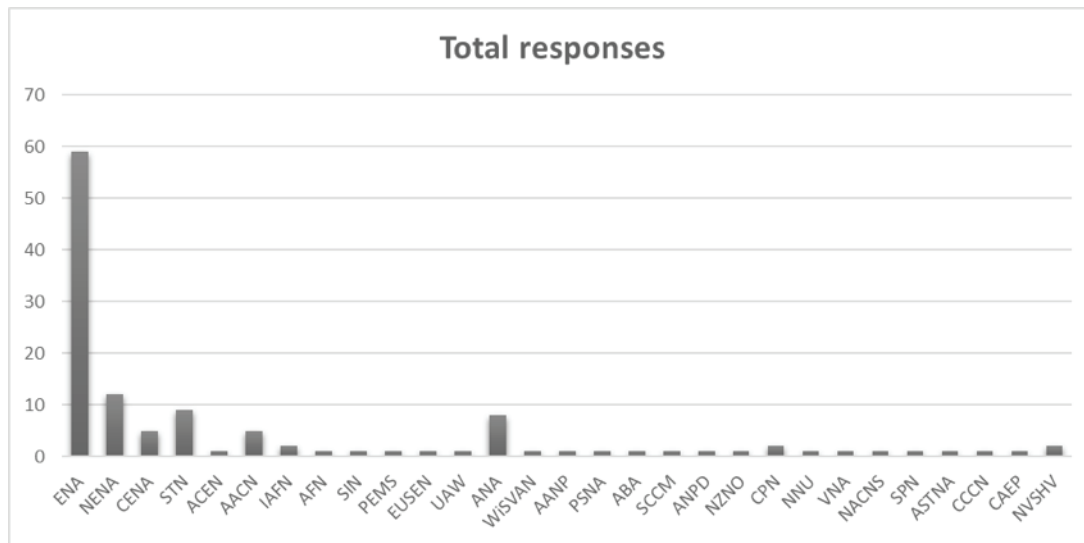


Figure 3

Are you a member of any other professional nursing organizations (not emergency)?
168 responses

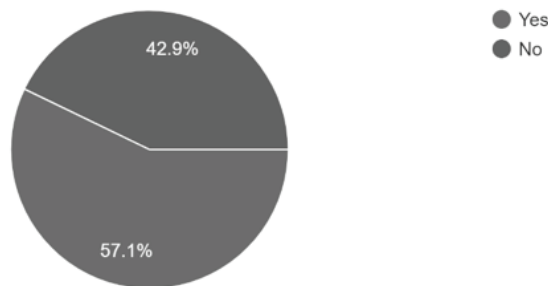
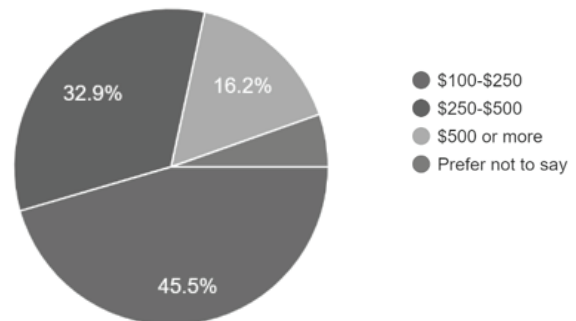


Figure 4

How much money do you invest in professional membership fees annually?
167 responses



\$250 annually toward professional memberships. The second largest group invested between \$250–\$500, this equated to 32.9% of respondents. This data has importance when understanding drivers and barriers for emergency nurses to join professional organizations and in particular the need to ensure the value meets the expectations of an emergency nurse. It is also important, and what we have seen through the feedback provided through this survey, for organizations aiming for international reach, that the cost is comparable to the cost of living related to the country of residence. For example, taking into factors not only financial such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The final point and most extensive data capture in this survey was gaining a greater understanding of the drivers for why emergency nurses join professional organizations. Some of the benefits of membership in a professional organization are

- Professional development opportunities ranked highest and were chosen by 76.5% of those surveyed. People in a wide variety of professions and businesses participate in professional development to learn and apply new knowledge and skills that will improve their performance on the job; emergency nurses are no different.

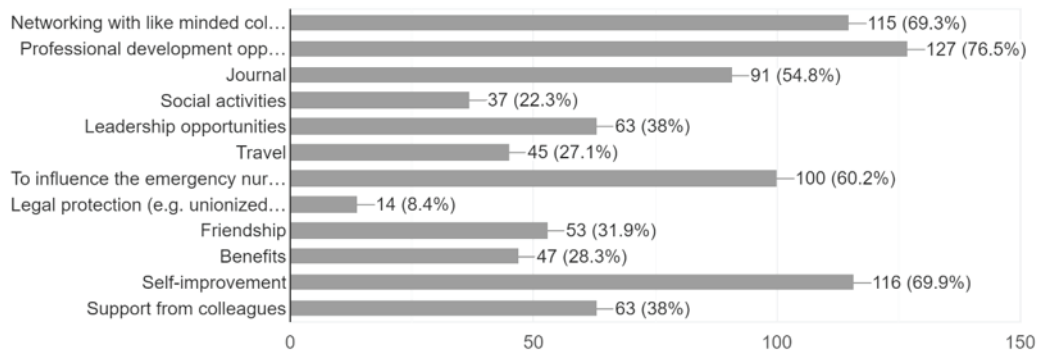
- Self-improvement was second at 69.9% of our survey. For emergency nurses, there is significant importance in expanding our knowledge and skills to implement evidence-based practices.
- 69.3% of people claimed networking with like-minded colleagues as the third highest benefit. Professional growth and development rely on surrounding yourself with individuals or organizations who challenge you to do better and support opportunities to allow you to diversify.

It is imperative for organizations to poll their participants regularly to see what gaps may exist in ensuring the member is able to receive the advantages promised. People's needs change and so must the organizations to ensure your membership is being continuously engaged. Table 3 further expands on other drivers for membership engagement and, of note, is that surprisingly only 28.3% of respondents are looking for benefits or perks from their professional membership. Similarly, only 22.3% of respondents are looking toward their professional membership to provide social activities. This could lead to a presumption that there is statistical significance that emergency nurses' main drivers for membership engagement lie mainly in collegiality and education.

Table 3

Now for a question around what benefits you seek when joining a professional organisation? (tick all that apply)

166 responses



Discussion

According to Echevarria (2018), nursing advocacy is fundamental to nursing and may occur at the individual, local, organizational, community, and policy levels. Professional nursing organizations should establish standards of practice for nursing and recommendations to advance health policy while promoting patient safety and always keeping the best interest of the members in perspective. Professional organizations can be seen as leaders in this space and the impact of a leader is determined by the way they interact and empower others (Echevarria, 2018). According to Farhan (2021), to be effective as a leader you must implement collaboration in decision making and everyone is required to think and act in the sense of solving issues, to ensure all points of view are considered. Encourage specialty certification as a principal factor in being involved in professional membership, this encourages the idea that personal growth and practice outcomes with career advancement are possible. According to the Canadian Nurses Association (2022), certified nurses are nationally recognized for practice excellence and commitment to life-long learning. They also provide employers with specialized knowledge and enhanced professional credibility. Certification may also allow for financial gains from your employer. Joining an organization can lead to personal growth and enhance your professional practice through knowledge development (Cline et al., 2019).

The other issue to consider is the cost of professional membership that is impacting global organizations, which is to reflect the economic burden on regional or international areas represented. The use of the 'Big Mac Index', which is utilized for adjustment to differences in income variabilities in countries, is a notable example of how professional organizations should index membership fees relative to the cost of living in the country (Clements & Si, 2017). Understanding how impactful, in a negative way, cost is as a barrier to emergency nurses joining a professional organization is crucial to building a larger membership base. The other consideration is based on discipline of membership and the cost to register in an organization may

differ. There needs to be ongoing, consistent effort toward promoting membership and innovative ideas. This can be achieved through showing potential members benefits of being involved and providing obtainable time management opportunity. Being stagnant or only doing recruitment when numbers decrease is not enough, there needs to be incentives on reaching goals. We could unite as associations globally and utilize each other's social media and connections to encourage a broader membership pool. According to the American Association of Nurse Practitioners (AANP, 2022), they have had a 20% increase in membership since 2019. This has been achieved through tailoring benefits to meet the needs of their members. In the survey results the highest respondents were based in the USA which could be reflective of similar data seen by AANP. Key ingredients for professional organization sustainability are accountable leadership; adaptability; and the resources to change and engage membership clinically, politically, and professionally (Wilson, 2022).

Our survey results revealed that almost 30% of respondents are not clinically practising, but instead may be in more senior roles, such as education or management. The results identify a gap in recruitment or strategies to engage with the 'bed-side' ED nurse. The results from the survey may also reflect bias due to the sample size and that individual respondents volunteered to participate. Associations need to be constantly recruiting and frequently re-evaluating efforts and the effectiveness of the efforts made. Associations should be looking at a needs assessment for whom they may represent. Nurses come with diverse experience, locations and needs and it is the association's job to be prepared to reduce the barriers to membership, drive member engagement, and leverage drivers for why emergency nurses invest in professional organization dues. As we address generational expansion of organization according to Frye (2018), the millennial generation has been the largest generational group in the American workforce since 2016 and have little time to devote to professional organizations as they are trying to establish their career. This has led to recruitment struggles among younger

professionals, considered vital in maintaining a healthy membership status for professional organizations. Professional membership should be viewed as a need to advance in your career. According to Rasheed et al. 2019, self-improvement is important for the personal and professional development of nurses; it helps improve nursing abilities and creates an effective nurse-patient relationship. Self-improvement may lead to decreasing attrition and may promote retention. Being self-aware does not only help nurses develop a more therapeutic and interpersonal relationship, but it also enables them to improve their critical thinking and clinical decision-making skills (Rasheed et al., 2019). According to Gorman (2019), there are many demands placed upon emergency nurses to engage and stay up to date with evidence-based practice, but at the same time it has been referenced to be like being “in the trenches of war”. This image along with chronic nursing shortages leading to fatigue and the inability to give anything further also hinders the desire to extend oneself to membership of a professional organization that is not mandatory.

Conclusion

Success of any professional organization is reliant on the strength of its membership base and emergency nursing organizations need emergency nurses to engage and see value in membership to remain a strong voice for the profession. The nurses' participation and membership ensure that they are engaged to participate and influence policy development, speak out on key issues affecting emergency nurses along with shaping the future of emergency nursing. If organizations want to promote growth rather than remaining stagnant, they need to consider the drivers

and barriers for emergency nurses professional membership engagement and provide incentives that can meet the needs of varying individuals. Organizations must stay relevant and flexible to attract new members, while keeping current members by being forward thinkers, highlighting value, and being willing to change and adapt.

Implications for emergency nursing practice

1. Little is published on the value of professional membership and membership engagement—particularly in emergency nursing. The literature review showed limited publications on this topic in nursing and no citations were found for emergency nursing.
2. We believe this may be the first publication focused on emergency nursing professional membership engagement. With this the paper adds value to the emergency nursing community globally.
3. The most important implication for emergency practice lies mostly with professional organisations, who bring emergency nurses together to gain a greater understanding of drivers and barriers to membership and engagement.

Recommendations

1. Further qualitative and quantitative research of membership engagement is required for prosperity and growth of professional organizations to support emergency nurses.
2. Further research is recommended to explore barriers to professional membership engagement. Barriers such as membership dues, the prospect of volunteer responsibilities on top of regular work duties, and family life, would value from further qualitative research.

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