

Challenges in pediatric nursing: A global and Nepalese perspective

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ABSTRACT

Pediatric nursing is a specialized field that requires not only strong clinical competence but also patience and emotional resilience. It focuses on the care of infants, children, and adolescents, where involvement of the family plays a crucial role in the overall care process. Despite advancements in healthcare systems across many parts of the world, pediatric nurses continue to encounter several challenges that influence the quality and delivery of care.

At the global level, common issues include a shortage of nursing staffs, increased workload, and the need to adapt to rapidly evolving technologies. In Nepal, these challenges are further intensified by limited resources, difficult geographical conditions, and restricted access to specialized training opportunities.

This review therefore examines both global and Nepalese contexts to better understand the existing challenges in paediatric nursing and to identify key areas requiring improvement.

KEYWORDS

Challenges, Pediatric nursing, Neonatal care

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INTRODUCTION

Children represent one of the most vulnerable populations in healthcare. Their physical, emotional, developmental, and psychological needs differ significantly from those of adults. Paediatric nurses therefore require specialized knowledge, communication skills, and clinical competencies to provide age-appropriate and family-centered care. Over time, paediatric nursing has gradually shifted from task-oriented approach to a more family-centered model care.¹ It involves caring for patients across a wide age range, from new-borns to adolescents. Unlike adult care, paediatric nursing emphasizes not only the child but also the family, as they play a significant role in decision-making and the overall care process.²

Globally, child survival has significantly improved due to advances in immunization, nutrition, neonatal care, and control of infectious diseases. Nevertheless, pediatric healthcare systems continue to face serious challenges, especially in resource-limited settings. The burden of neonatal mortality, malnutrition, respiratory illnesses, congenital disorders, trauma, and emerging infectious diseases places immense pressure on paediatric nursing services. Also, the pattern of childhood illness is changing with an increasing prevalence of chronic conditions and mental health conditions.³

Paediatric nursing challenges in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like Nepal are due to its difficult geography, unequal distribution of healthcare facilities, workforce shortages, and disparities in socioeconomic status. Although there has been notable progress in reducing child mortality, the quality of specialized paediatric nursing care remains inconsistent in the nation. Rural and mountainous regions often lack adequately trained paediatric nurses and neonatal care services.⁴

Global challenges in paediatric nursing

1. Workforce shortage and burnout

One of the major global problems is the lack of enough trained paediatric nurses. Many countries face insufficient numbers of nurses trained specifically in child health. This shortage affects patient safety, quality of care, and healthcare outcomes. According to the World Health Organization reports, the current workforce is still not sufficient to meet health care needs, especially in paediatric and neonatal care.⁵

Important factors that can lead to workforce shortages are:

- Increasing healthcare demand
- Population growth
- Migration of nurses to developed countries
- Poor salary and working conditions
- Burnout and job dissatisfaction

Because of the workforce shortages, nurses often have to care for more patients than recommended, which increases their workload and stress. Low nurse-to-patient ratios increase medication errors, reduce monitoring quality, and compromise emotional support to children and families. Taking care of very sick children or dealing with end-of-life

situations also puts emotional pressure on nurses, which can eventually lead to burnout.⁶ Studies from high-income countries have shown increasing burnout and compassion fatigue among paediatric nurses. Nearly 40% of paediatric nurses report frequent burnout symptoms.⁷

2. Emotional and psychological stress

Paediatric nurses regularly care for critically ill children, neonates, and dying patients. This creates substantial emotional stress to the nurses. Nurses working in neonatal intensive care units (NICUs), paediatric intensive care units (PICUs), oncology wards, and emergency departments are particularly vulnerable and emotionally challenging. Nurses not only care for sick children but also support their worried and sometimes distressed families. In these situations, feelings like compassion fatigue and moral distress are common, especially when resources are limited or outcomes are not positive. Over time, repeated exposure to such situations can affect mental health and may lead to anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, or reduced job satisfaction. Frequent exposure to suffering children and grieving families can negatively affect nurses' mental health and professional performance.⁸

3. Communication barriers

Effective communication in pediatric nursing is complex and not an easy task because nurses must communicate with children of different developmental stages, parents, caregivers and multidisciplinary healthcare teams. Children, depending on their age, may not be able to clearly explain what they are feeling or their symptoms. Fear, anxiety, pain, developmental delay, and language barriers can complicate communication. At the same time, differences in language and culture can make it harder to communicate with families. These misunderstandings can affect how well treatment is followed and how satisfied families are with the care. Nurses must adapt communication techniques according to the child's age and cognitive level.⁹

4. Ethical and legal issues

Ethical and legal issues are also important in paediatric nursing. Things like consent, confidentiality, and decision-making can be complicated. Since children usually cannot make their own medical decisions, parents or guardians make those decisions for them. However, sometimes the decisions made by caregivers may not fully match what is medically best for the child, which can create challenges for health care providers.¹⁰ Nurses must receive specialized training in caring for premature and neonates and they can consult ethics committee for guidance and support.

5. Technological advancements and skill gaps

Healthcare technology is advancing very quickly, and it can be difficult to keep up with these changes. Modern pediatric care increasingly depends on advanced technology like mechanical ventilation, cardiac monitoring, use of infusion pumps, telemedicine and maintaining electronic medical records. Not all nurses in LMICs get equal opportunities, trainings and technical support to handle such devices and

equipments. This adversely affects the confidence of the nurses and directly hampers the patient safety.²

6. Infection control and patient safety

Children, especially new-borns, have very weak immune systems and susceptible to infection easily. Maintaining hospital environment clean and safe is a massive challenge in places especially in overcrowded with limited staffs and supplies.¹¹

Medication errors can also occur in paediatric care; pediatric doses are usually calculated by weight, which requires extra attention.

Paediatric Nursing Challenges in Nepal

Nepal faces similar but often intensified challenges compared to neighbors. High neonatal mortality rate remains a pressing concern. Urban-rural disparities create unequal access to skilled care. A persistent “knowing-doing” gap limits translation of training into practice. Geographical barriers and resource constraints in remote areas strongly shape policy priorities. The important challenges with pediatric nursing encountered in Nepal are:

1. Limited healthcare infrastructure

Healthcare facilities in Nepal are still developing, especially in rural and remote areas. Paediatric services like dedicated pediatric wards, NICUs and PICUs, equipments required for monitoring the babies, oxygen supply systems, infection control systems and adequate beds are lacking in many hospitals of Nepal. Nurses frequently work in overcrowded environments with insufficient supplies and heavy workloads. This leads to delays in treatment affecting the final health outcomes of the children.¹²

2. Shortage of skilled paediatric nurses

Nepal faces a significant shortage of specialized paediatric and neonatal nurses, especially in rural and mountainous regions.¹³ Many nurses receive general nursing education and have limited opportunities to specialize further. This problem is more noticeable in critical care areas like NICUs and PICUs, where specialized skills are very important. The shortage of nurses is worsened by migration of Nepalese nurses abroad for further education, low salary, poor working conditions and limited career advancement opportunities

3. High workload and burnout

Pediatric nurses in Nepal commonly experience long duty hours and inadequate staffing. Inadequate staffing and large number of patients leads the nurses to work for long hours. Other factors encountered by the nurses are emotional exhaustion, low salary scales and occupational stress. These issues lead to stress and burnout, which finally affects the quality of the care provided.¹⁴

4. Cultural and socioeconomic barriers

Cultural beliefs and financial conditions influence how people seek healthcare in Nepal. Traditional beliefs and low health literacy continue to influence child healthcare practices in Nepal. Nurses may face resistance regarding breastfeeding practices, vaccination, neonatal care, hospital delivery and nutrition practices. In some areas, people still prefer traditional healing practices, which can delay proper medical treatment. Low health awareness and gender-related issues can delay proper medical treatment. Low health awareness and gender-related issues can also affect decisions about children's health. Family-centered counselling, therefore, is an essential component of paediatric nursing.¹⁵

5. Communication challenges

Nepal is a multi-lingual country, so language differences can make communication difficult. Also, some caregivers may not fully understand medical information, making it harder for healthcare workers to clearly explain conditions and treatments.¹⁶

6. Limited training and continuing education

Continuous professional development opportunities for pediatric nurses remain inadequate in Nepal. Training programs in neonatal resuscitation, pediatric emergency care, mechanical ventilation, infection prevention and developmentally supportive care are not uniformly available within the country. Many nurses in Nepal have limited access to ongoing training and professional development. Without regular updates in knowledge and skills, it becomes difficult for them to follow the latest best practices in paediatric care.¹⁷ Previous studies in Nepal have already identified gaps in neonatal nursing care practices and emphasized the need for improved training and supervision.^{18, 19}

7. Resource constraints

Many healthcare facilities do not have enough basic supplies, equipment, and medicines. Because of this shortage, the quality and safety of care provided to children can be affected.²⁰

8. Infection control issues

Infection prevention remains difficult in overcrowded hospitals with limited resources. The main challenges in those hospitals are poor infrastructures, inadequate hand hygiene facilities, limited PPE availability, poor waste management and overcrowding in neonatal units. This finally affects proper infection control in the hospitals and increases the risk of hospital-acquired infections, especially in children who are already vulnerable. Hospital-acquired infections significantly increase the neonatal morbidity and mortality.²¹

CONCLUSION

Pediatric nursing is a demanding yet highly rewarding profession that has a profound impact on the health and well-being of children. Although challenges such as workforce shortages, emotional burnout, and ethical dilemmas are experienced worldwide, these difficulties are often common in Nepal because of inadequate resources, limited infrastructure, and gaps in healthcare access. Addressing these issues requires collaborative efforts from policymakers, healthcare organizations, and educational institutions. Greater investment in specialized training, supportive work environments, and stronger healthcare systems is essential to empower paediatric nurses and improve the quality of child healthcare. To improve the situation, there needs to be strong coordination between policymakers, healthcare institutions, and educators. Investments in training, improving working conditions, and strengthening the healthcare systems can make a real difference. With these right efforts, better outcomes for children can be achieved.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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