



**INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL  
OF NURSES**

3, place Jean-Marteau  
1201 Geneva, Switzerland  
Tel. +41 22 908 01 00  
Fax +41 22 908 01 01

E-mail: [icn@icn.ch](mailto:icn@icn.ch)  
Web site: [www.icn.ch](http://www.icn.ch)

**Guidelines**

**Career Moves  
and Migration:  
Critical  
Questions**



# **CAREER MOVES AND MIGRATION: CRITICAL QUESTIONS GUIDELINES**

All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in print, by photostatic means or in any other manner, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form without the express written permission of the International Council of Nurses. Short excerpts (under 300 words) may be reproduced without authorisation, on condition that the source is indicated.

Copyright © 2010 by ICN - International Council of Nurses  
3, place Jean-Marteau, 1201 Geneva, Switzerland

ISBN: 978-92-95094-20-8

Printing: Imprimerie Fornara, Geneva

**CAREER MOVES AND MIGRATION:  
CRITICAL QUESTIONS  
GUIDELINES** ■

BACKGROUND	2
ADVANTAGES AND PERILS OF CAREER MOVES AND MIGRATION FOR INDIVIDUAL NURSES	3
RECRUITMENT ABUSES	5
NURSE MIGRATION TRENDS	11
ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR NURSE RECRUITMENT	13
CRITICAL QUESTIONS	15
SUMMARY	16

Nurses have always sought and will continue to seek professional development opportunities. Beginning with their nursing education and then through continuing and further education, such as specialisation, nurses look for stimulating learning experiences (both theoretical and practical). The application of newly acquired knowledge, skills and behaviours then becomes a personal goal. Often, however, such opportunities require career moves - to a new unit, care setting, institution, cultural context and/or country.

With these guidelines, the International Council of Nurses (ICN) aims to:

- Highlight potential advantages and perils of career moves and migration for nurses;
- Describe some of the main nurse migration trends;
- Establish a list of critical questions for consideration before accepting a new position.

## BACKGROUND

For the purposes of this document, **professional development** in nursing is defined as the establishment of higher levels of competence in the range of knowledge and skills needed to perform duties or support interventions, be they in clinical practice, management, education, research, regulation or policy-making. **Career development** is associated with the employment or labour context of the professional's work and implies advancement. It is usually demonstrated by the improved recognition (i.e. title) and reward (i.e. salary and benefits) given for providing services as specified within an individual's successive work contracts.

**Career moves** are changes in employment, e.g. employer, job, job description or status as in the case of a nurse pursuing further education on a full-time basis. Career moves can be demotions as well as promotions or lateral moves. They are the movement of nurses to different levels, to different areas of nursing practice or to positions in which different functions predominate. **Career mobility** indicates the ease with which these moves are undertaken.

Professional and career development of nursing personnel need to evolve within the context of the health system as a whole and must allow for horizontal as well as vertical career mobility.<sup>1</sup> Career moves are often critical both to nurses in furthering their careers and to society in allowing nursing to adapt and respond to changing health needs. Better prepared nurses will contribute to the improvement of quality care and patient outcomes.

In the pursuit of professional fulfilment and development, nurses may consider various career moves which may be long term or short term (e.g. secondments, sabbaticals). Among the most frequent and pertinent to this discussion are:

- Registration in an educational institution;
- Entry/re-entry into the workforce;
- Lateral move within the same work environment/for same employer;
- Lateral move to different work environment within same district/province/country;
- Vertical move within the same work environment/for same employer;
- Vertical move to different work environment within same district/province/country;
- Immigration to a different country;
- Sector transfer (e.g. public vs. private);
- Change of function or time at work in preparation for retirement or linked to changes in family responsibilities; and
- Employee status (e.g. salaried worker vs. entrepreneur).

Each of these career moves provides distinct advantages and disadvantages, opportunities and challenges. Nurses often ignore many of the financial aspects of career moves (see below). While these factors need not predominate, their implications should be carefully examined. A thorough investigation of options and conditions is required for informed decision-making.

## ADVANTAGES AND PERILS OF CAEER MOVES AND MIGRATION FOR INDIVIDUAL NURSES

Career moves often enable nurses to achieve personal career goals and contribute to the nursing profession by raising the competency of its members. They allow nursing to respond to scientific, technological, social, political and economic changes by modifying or expanding the roles, composition and supply of nursing personnel to meet identified health needs.

In most cases, career moves provide opportunities for:

- Professional development;
- Opportunities to apply special skills;
- Career development or advancement;
- Improved quality of life;
- Greater job satisfaction;
- Recognition of professional expertise;
- Higher self-esteem;
- Wider sphere of influence;
- Relevant learning opportunities; and/or
- Multi-disciplinary approaches.

In summary, career moves often permit and facilitate personal and professional development as well as provide benefits to the patients under the nurses' care. This in turn promotes job satisfaction and excellence in nursing practice while supporting nurse recruitment and retention.

Career mobility is most often perceived and welcomed as a positive reinforcement for an individual (see above). However, there is evidence that career moves may negatively affect nurses' lives in retirement as well as during employment. Internationally migrating nurses may be particularly vulnerable to these dangers given the difficulty in verifying the basic terms of reference of a work contract and actual employment situation in another country. The potential dangers must be acknowledged and considered before any career move. The following table highlights some of the major issues.

Issue	Possible causes
<i>Decreased income</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of pension benefits</li> <li>• Loss of seniority allowances</li> <li>• Loss of 'loyalty'/long service bonuses</li> <li>• Loss of 'speciality' bonuses</li> <li>• Loss of 'hardship' bonuses (e.g. unsocial hours, danger)</li> <li>• Loss of bonuses due to speciality training no longer recognised</li> <li>• Change of pension scheme</li> <li>• Change of pension coverage within same scheme</li> <li>• Loss of investment in national retirement insurance plan</li> <li>• Inability to participate in national retirement insurance plan</li> <li>• Loss of child/dependant allocations</li> <li>• Delay/neglect in filing transfer forms (e.g. pension)</li> </ul>
<i>Lower professional status</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-recognition of specialisation skills not specifically required in present job</li> <li>• Non-recognition of degrees/-diplomas obtained abroad</li> <li>• Non-recognition of continuing education credits</li> <li>• Non-recognition of work experience, skill development</li> </ul>
<i>Threatened personal safety</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor working conditions</li> <li>• Poor staffing levels</li> <li>• Inadequate management and support staff</li> <li>• Inadequate equipment</li> <li>• Poor application of universal precautions</li> <li>• Unsatisfactory accommodation</li> <li>• Unsound/unethical financial management of employer</li> <li>• Cultural incompatibility</li> <li>• Increased vulnerability to physical violence and/or emotional abuse (e.g. sexual harassment, racial harassment, verbal abuse, bullying)</li> </ul>

In response to chronic (often cyclical) nursing shortages worldwide, the local and international recruitment of nurses has considerably increased in volume. National public health services, independent health care employers and agencies are all engaged in the recruitment process. While the percentage of foreign-educated nurses may be stable in many countries, the absolute numbers increase every year. As a result, the business and profit-making opportunities for private enterprises directly and indirectly involved in the recruitment process are also expanding. Private for-profit agencies have increasingly become involved in the search for nursing personnel. In some cases, employers, employment agencies and/or recruitment agents take advantage of badly informed nurses.

## RECRUITMENT ABUSES

Aggressive recruitment campaigns are on the increase. This type of recruitment focuses on large numbers of recruits, sometimes significantly depleting a given health facility or contracting an important number of newly graduated nurses from a given educational institute. There is usually no designated body that regulates or monitors the content of contracts offered. Nurses may be employed under false pretences or misled as to the conditions of work and possible remuneration and benefits.<sup>2</sup> Internationally recruited nurses may be particularly at risk of exploitation or abuse; the difficulty of verifying the terms of employment being increased due to distance, language barriers, cost, etc.

Examples of such abuse include:

- Hidden charges (e.g. agency fee);
- Double charges (e.g. agency and employer recruitment fee);
- False/misleading information (e.g. accommodation, orientation);
- Inappropriate accommodation charges;
- Non-payment or non-compliance with the terms of the contracted agreement (e.g. return flight);
- Implied but refused access to grievance procedures;
- Imposed non-paid orientation period;
- Unspecified conditions of work (e.g. hours, leave, duration of contract, insurance);
- Unspecified work assignment (e.g. contagious ward with no barrier equipment);
- Abusive treatment (e.g. retention of travel documents, forced re-negotiation of contract upon arrival);
- Hidden or unclear penalty clauses (e.g. payment of fine if employment period not respected);
- Absent termination clause.

In many cases, career moves (including international employment experiences) improve nurses' quality of life and provide positive opportunities for personal and

professional development. Nurses' career moves however must be the result of informed decisions. Employed nurses or those seeking employment must have access to representative organisations (i.e. professional associations, trade unions) that will help ensure respect of their human and workers' rights.

## NURSE MIGRATION TRENDS

Migration flow tends to be from rural to urban areas, from lower to higher income urban neighbourhoods, and from developing to industrialised countries. There is also a noted move from the public to the private sector in many countries, including project driven employment. International migration flow is changing in that the 'supplier' countries are increasingly among the low-income countries. Recruitment is no longer solely between relatively rich countries and regions (North America and Western Europe) but includes Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Migration within a given geographical area is often determined by economic factors, e.g. in sub-Saharan Africa. The single and most pervasive cause of migration in many developing countries is economic.<sup>3</sup>

There is widespread consensus that nurses migrate in search of incentives that usually fall within three categories:

- Improved learning and practice opportunities;
- Better quality of life, pay and working conditions; and/or
- Personal safety.<sup>4</sup>

International migration has always existed. It is now being further facilitated because of shortages of skilled labour in industrialised countries, the privatisation of nursing education (often aimed at preparing nurses for practice abroad) and increasing numbers of mutual recognition agreements often linked to international trade agreements. The pros and cons of international migration are summarised below:

INTERNATIONAL NURSE MIGRATION	
PROS	CONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational opportunities</li> <li>• Professional practice opportunities</li> <li>• Personal and occupational safety</li> <li>• Better working conditions</li> <li>• Improved quality of life</li> <li>• Greater job satisfaction</li> <li>• Trans-cultural nursing workforce (e.g. racial and ethnic diversity)</li> <li>• Cultural sensitivity/competence in care</li> <li>• Stimulation of nurse-friendly recruitment and contract conditions</li> <li>• Personal development</li> <li>• Global economic development</li> <li>• Improved knowledge base and brain 'gain'</li> <li>• Wider sphere of influence</li> <li>• Sustained maintenance and development of family members in the country of origin</li> <li>• Brain circulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brain and/or skills drain</li> <li>• Brain waste, non-recognition of specialisation skills</li> <li>• Non-recognition of degrees or diplomas and work experience</li> <li>• Non-recognition of continuing education credits</li> <li>• Closure of health facilities due to nursing shortages in a given area</li> <li>• Overwork of nurses practising in depleted areas</li> <li>• Potentially abusive recruitment and employment practices</li> <li>• Vulnerable status of migrants</li> <li>• Loss of national economic investment in human resource development</li> <li>• Loss of pension benefits</li> <li>• Loss of bonuses, e.g. long service, speciality, child allowances</li> <li>• Cultural incompatibility</li> </ul>

When considering international migration, there is a delicate balance to be maintained between the human and labour rights of the individual and a collective concern for the health of the 'exporting' nation's population. There is consensus in the literature that "trade globalisation and the growing lack of skilled labour in rich countries are likely to accelerate the brain drain from the South for some time to come".<sup>5</sup> The success of interventions to support the positive impact of international migration while minimising its negative conse-

quences depends on the level of socio-economic and technological development in each country and a long-term strategy commitment by professional and political leaders.<sup>6</sup> ICN recognises the right of individual nurses to migrate, and confirms the potential beneficial outcomes of multicultural practice and learning opportunities supported by migration. ICN also acknowledges the adverse effect that international migration may have on health care quality in countries seriously depleted of their nursing workforce.<sup>7</sup>

## ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR NURSE RECRUITMENT

Increasingly there have been calls for an ethical framework for nurse recruitment. The principles supporting such a framework are relevant to intra-national as well as international recruitment. Their credibility, strength and universality will directly depend on the political will of health sector stakeholders and the regulatory mechanisms introduced for their application and monitoring.

ICN denounces unethical recruitment practices that exploit nurses or mislead them into accepting job responsibilities and working conditions that are incompatible with their qualifications, skills and experience. ICN and its member national nurses associations have called for a regulated recruitment process based on ethical principles that guide informed decision-making and reinforce sound employment policies on the part of governments, employers and nurses, thus supporting fair and cost-effective recruitment and retention practices.<sup>8</sup>

These key principles include:

1. Effective human resources planning and development leading to national self-sustainability;
2. Credible nursing regulation;
3. Access to full employment;
4. Freedom of movement;
5. Freedom from discrimination;
6. Good faith contracting;



7. Equal pay for work of equal value;
8. Access to grievance procedures;
9. Safe work environment;
10. Effective orientation/mentoring/supervision;
11. Employment trial periods;
12. Freedom of association;
13. Regulation of recruitment;

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

The quality of work life and the practice environment in many health care facilities needs to be improved before high vacancy and turnover rates significantly decrease. Nurse migration and career moves will continue and, in an ethical context, should advantage society as well as nurses. Career moves must be decided on the grounds of reliable information on the key stakeholders involved, the contract process, conditions of employment, benefits, possible fees and the impact on nurses' present and future quality of life.

A list of critical questions is presented below to guide nurses in the collection of all needed information:

### 1. What are the credentials or references of the recruitment/employment agency?

- What is its history?
- What is its reputation?
- Is the agency legally registered to recruit?
- What is the track record, e.g. rate of successful placements, level of client satisfaction?
- What is the agency's financial viability, e.g. revenue vs. operational costs?
- Who are the agency's owners, managers and creditors?
- What references do they offer?
- What category of employers contracts this agency?
- What fee(s) does this agency charge and to whom?

### 2. What are the credentials or references of the employer?

- What are the characteristics of the patient population, e.g. categories, numbers?
- What are the characteristics of the work environment, e.g. building, patient units?
- How do local nurses view their status, pay and working conditions in this area/country?
- What is the employer's safety record?
- What policies and measures are taken to ensure the safety of the personnel, e.g. infection control, protective equipment, anti-violence policies?
- What is the financial context of the employer, e.g. private, public, private/public sector?

- What is the financial viability of the employer, e.g. sources of revenue, bed vacancies, budget deficits in recent years?
- What are the characteristics of the personnel employed, e.g. categories, numbers, turnover?
- Where is the employing facility located, e.g. rural/urban?
- What is the level of safety in the site's neighbourhood?
- What means of transport are available to and from the worksite at the hours required?
- What possibilities are offered to accommodate the needs of family members?
- What are the grievance procedures available to staff?
- What are the employer's attitudes towards workers' organisations?
- What references are required?

### 3. What are the conditions of employment?

- What are the professional licensing requirements in the country, state or province?
- If additional qualifications are required, what support is provided if education or exams are necessary?
- If professional registration is required, what is the fee and who pays it?
- Is a work permit required? If yes, what is the procedure for obtaining one and who is responsible for the application process and possible fee?
- Is an extension of the work permit possible and under what conditions?
- What is the salary? How does it compare to the minimum wage? What is the average salary of locally recruited nurses for a similar job?
- What is the level of income tax to be paid?
- What are the conditions of work, e.g. hours, rest periods, shifts?
- What are the benefits, e.g. leave, study leave, continuing/further education, maternity leave, health insurance, pension, transport, housing, clothing, laundry, child care?
- Is there access to hot food and rest/changing rooms at the workplace?

- What promotion opportunities exist?
- What support staff will be available in the workplace?
- Are there any recruitment bonuses and on what conditions?
- Are there recruitment fees and under what circumstances?
- Will a pre-employment medical exam or exams be required? If yes, where do they take place and who pays the charge?
- Is there an organised period of orientation to the workplace and work responsibilities?
- Is a trial period imposed and under what conditions? What are the consequences if the trial period is unsuccessful?
- Are there language competencies that need to be developed or certified?
- What are the notice requirements (i.e. termination)?
- Are there any conditions with regard to original transport to the workplace and repatriation in the case of long distances or international travel?
- What is the access to local/national professional associations and trade unions?

### 4. What is the job description?

- What is the patient/client population?
- What competencies are required?
- What is the average nurse/patient ratio in the workplace unit?
- What is the hierarchy of authority?
- What is your title?

### 5. What is the impact of this career move?

- What is the impact on revenue?
- How does this change in employment conform to the individual career plan?
- What is the impact on future professional advancement?
- What is the impact on acquired or future pension rights?
- How will this affect a reintegration into the present employment setting if a return is desired, e.g. loss of seniority?
- What is the impact on social security, e.g. health insurance and disability benefits?

- If moving far from family, will homesickness present a significant problem?
- If the career move involves an educational programme, questions need to be asked about:
  - The programme's success rate;
  - Access to financial subsidies;
  - Award and transferability of credits;
  - Recognition of diploma/degree;
  - Bias against foreign students, e.g. selection process, fees;
  - Accreditation of prior and experiential learning (APEL).

## SUMMARY

Career moves are significant sources of job satisfaction and facilitate professional development. In many cases, they also represent an improvement in the quality of life. Each career move, including those involving international migration, will provide distinct advantages and disadvantages, opportunities and challenges.

The potential perils of exploitation and abuse exist however and should be avoided as much as possible. Career moves may negatively affect nurses' lives during employment, but also in retirement. In certain cases, changing employment may result in a decreased income, lower professional status and/or threatened personal safety. Well-informed decisions are part of the solution. A thorough investigation of options and conditions is required before accepting new employment.

Access to information needs to be ensured and facilitated by nurses' professional and trade union organisations. Cooperation between local branches and among the national bodies will support the collection of reliable data and search for rewarding options. These nursing groups have a fundamental role to play in safeguarding nurses' and nursing's interests.

Nurse migration is usually related to at least one of the following factors:

- Improved learning and practice opportunities;
- Better quality of life, pay and working conditions; and/or
- Personal safety.

International migration has always existed and is likely to continue in the light of trade globalisation and the growing shortages of skilled labour in industrialised countries. The advantages for nurses and society as a whole are numerous. ICN recognises the right of individual nurses to migrate, and confirms the potential

beneficial outcomes of multicultural practice and learning opportunities supported by migration while acknowledging the adverse effect that international migration may have on health care quality in countries seriously depleted of their nursing workforce.

ICN and its member associations call for a regulated recruitment process based on ethical principles that guide informed decision-making and reinforce sound employment policies on the part of governments, employers and nurses (see above).

Career moves must be decided on the grounds of reliable information on the key stakeholders involved, the contract process, conditions of employment, benefits, imposed fees and the impact on nurses' present and future quality of life.

Nurses considering a change in employment need to know:

- **What are the credentials of the recruitment / employment agency?**
- **What are the credentials of the employer?**
- **What are the conditions of employment?**
- **What is the job description?**
- **What is the impact of this career move?**

## REFERENCES

- 1 International Council of Nurses (2007a). *Career development in nursing*. Position Statement, [www.icn.ch/PS\\_C02\\_Career%20Dev.Nsg.pdf](http://www.icn.ch/PS_C02_Career%20Dev.Nsg.pdf)
- 2 Kingma M (2006). *Nurses on the Move. Migration and the Global Health Care Economy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- 3 Olayinka Ojo K (1990). *International Migration of Health Manpower in Sub-Saharan Africa*. *Soc Sci Med* 31 (6) 631-7.
- 4 Kingma M (2006). *Op. cit.*
- 5 Gaillard A & Gaillard J (2001). *Brain Drain to Brain Gain*, UNESCO Sources 132:4-6
- 6 Kingma M (2006). *Op. cit.*
- 7 International Council of Nurses (2007b). *Ethical Nurse Recruitment*. Position Statement, [www.icn.ch/psrecruit01.htm](http://www.icn.ch/psrecruit01.htm)
- 8 International Council of Nurses (2007b). *Ibid.*

### Further references see:

International Council of Nurses ([www.icn.ch](http://www.icn.ch))  
 International Centre on Nurse Migration ([www.intlnursemigration.org](http://www.intlnursemigration.org))  
 International Centre for Human Resources in Nursing ([www.ichrn.org](http://www.ichrn.org))