

OR Staff Burnout

The shortage of perioperative staff, including scrub techs, circulating nurses, and surgical assistants, is hitting hospitals and ASCs hard. Long hours, high stress, and staffing shortages have led to alarming levels of burnout. This not only affects morale and retention but also impacts patient care and staff efficiency.

How Bad is Burnout in the US?

Hospitals and ASCs run on tight schedules and high demands, yet staffing levels haven't kept up. Nurses and techs work shifts, surgeons are booked back-to-back, breaks are rare, and mistakes are costly.

Burnout affects:



- 70% of residents
- 60% of surgical technologists
- 50% of attending surgeons
- 50% of nurses
- 40% of anesthesiologists

So, why is this occurring, and what can we do to fix it?

An Aging Population

Baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, comprise a large part of the US population. As this generation enters retirement age, hospitals and ASCs have experienced a huge jump in demand for surgical services.

Why is This Happening?

The last baby boomers will reach retirement age in 2029. From 2011 to 2019, the number of Americans aged 65 and over jumped from 41 million to 71 million. This increased demand is not matched with increased staffing, leading existing healthcare workers to take on more patients than ever.



73%

**Increase in Americans
aged 65 and older**
by 2029 [1]

Furthermore, an aging population means more nurses and surgical professionals are retiring, too. Hospitals and ASCs are taking on more patients than ever while losing staff to retirement and burnout.

22%-55%

of the nursing population in Australia and the United States are 50 years and above. [2]

What Can be Done?

To match higher demand, surgical facilities need to increase staff or find a way to make the current staff's job easier. Software that reduces tedious manual tasks, such as preference card editing and case picking, can help relieve the burdens that surgical teams face.

Staff Shortages

The healthcare workforce is reaching a critical tipping point. Across operating rooms and hospital floors, staff shortages are no longer a distant threat; they're a fast-approaching reality. As demand for surgical and nursing care continues to rise, the number of trained professionals isn't keeping pace.

It is projected that **by 2034**, there will be shortages of

15,800 to 30,200

surgical specialists.

&

by 2030,

275,000

additional nurses will be needed. [3]

Why is This Happening?

As education costs reach sky-high levels, fewer surgical specialists and nurses are entering the workforce. Students can no longer justify the extreme debt required for these roles, which is creating problems in a country where the demand for surgical and nursing services continues to rise year after year.

Additionally, a high cost of living makes twelve years of undergraduate, medical school, and residency more unrealistic, especially for someone living on their own. The burden is also felt by nurses, many of whom complete rigorous training while managing long shifts, student debt, and rising living expenses.

High turnover rates are a significant problem in the healthcare industry for many reasons. First, burnout is causing many people to find a new job or quit the healthcare industry altogether, exacerbating the issue even more. Another reason is abuse by patients, which can take an intense emotional toll on healthcare workers, especially when they are already overworked.

8%-38%

of healthcare workers worldwide experience a form of violence, verbal or physical, during their careers. [4]

What Can be Done?

Lowering the cost of medical school or increasing surgeon and nurse salaries would be the best way to encourage students to pursue surgical careers. Educating students on the high need for surgical specialties, nursing shortages, and the projected industry growth may improve future outcomes.

Finding new ways to make healthcare workers' lives easier is crucial at the moment. The influx of patients will not stop anytime soon, and neither will the shortage. Platforms like PREFcards can reduce hours of manual labor and improve surgical efficiency.

Offering more support to healthcare workers is critical to maintaining morale and improving turnover rates. Some ideas include hiring an on-site mental health worker or offering free counseling services. For nurses, especially, who often shoulder the logistical burden of the OR, support can go a long way. Ideas include hiring on-site mental health professionals, offering free or subsidized counseling services, and implementing systems that reduce unnecessary administrative strain.

Conclusion

As healthcare systems take on more patients than ever before due to an aging population, workers are facing symptoms of burnout and are leaving the industry. Staff shortages are magnifying this issue, the high cost of medical school is causing less surgeons to enter the workforce every year, and more nurses leave the profession year after year.

Surgical software such as PREFcards can help reduce burnout in the OR by simplifying workflows and reducing labor hours needed for trivial tasks. Hospitals and ASCs should consider offering mental health resources to their staff to prevent burnout and improve employee retention.

Sources

[1] Nursing Shortage, Haddad et al., 2023

[2] Perioperative Nursing Shortages: An Integrative Review of Their Impact, Causal Factors, and Mitigation Strategies, Xie et al., 2024

[3] Burnout and career satisfaction among American surgeons, Shanafelt et al., 2009

[4] Surgical Workforce, American College of Surgeons