Is there structured career management in the medical radiations profession?

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Abstract The medical radiations profession in Australia is experiencing staff recruitment and retention problems. In addition, the profession currently lacks a clear and consistent career management structure. This paper explores the published literature that relates to medical radiations career management. Upon investigation, there appears to be limited literature on the topic of career management in medical radiations. This does not mean that active career management is not taking place in the medical radiations profession; it may be that career management is not being fully explored or documented in the literature. With limited literature, a broad view needed to be taken with this paper to examine a number of issues currently impacting on the medical radiations profession.

Literature suggests that encouraging, supporting and rewarding staff through career management is required if the profession is to move forward. The profession must take control in defining itself and shaping its future. Developing career management strategies that promote and support staff in the pursuit of career development activities must occur if the profession is to overcome staff shortages and issues of low staff morale. As an emerging profession, it is time for the profession to define itself and advance in a manner that recognises career management and career structure as being central to addressing the current recruitment and retention issues.

Keywords: Career management, career advancement, continued professional development, medical radiations, radiography

Introduction

Knowledge is a unique resource. The developing staff knowledge, and consequently organisation knowledge through learning is essential.1 Human resource development requires an organisation to create a strategy by which to train, develop and enhance the skills of staff. Successfully put into practice, career management can influence career satisfaction and provide opportunity for staff career progression. Supporting the individual in career management is vital and organisations have the responsibility to provide opportunity and support to assist individuals in achieving their goals as the rewards can be beneficial to all. Armstrong2 highlights the importance of actively working with employees to establish a balance between individual and organisational goals. Armstrong explains that the risks organisations face if they do not approach career development in a collaborative manner, will be that staff become, or remain, unfulfilled and unmotivated. Staff losses and reduced productivity can result and, consequently, this can have far reaching effects throughout the organisation. In order to promote a healthy and satisfying workplace the aspects explored in this article are vital. Management should value and recognise individual’s efforts, the necessity and benefits of ongoing learning supported by the establishment of career management programs.

Career management is recognised as an important process that contributes to the development of organisations and individuals. Career management is defined by Greenhaus in Noe as ‘the process by which individuals collect information about values, interests, and skill strengths and weaknesses (career exploration), identify a career goal, and engage in career strategies that increase the probability that career goals will be achieved’. The medical radiations profession, encompassing radiation therapists, radiographers and nuclear medicine technologists is no exception, although there does not appear to be a substantial body of literature relevant to medical radiations. This paper will focus on highlighting the main findings of the literature pertaining to career management in the medical radiations profession. In order to provide a holistic overview of factors that impact on career management in medical radiations, the issues of role expansion, education, career progression, and continued professional development will be explored. Literature has been sourced globally as there was limited information relating to career management in medical radiations within the Australian literature.

Literature review

There is currently a shortage of radiographers in Victoria.3 In recent years, there has also been a shortage of medical radiations staff, with retention and recruitment identified as major issues.4,5 Factors contributing to the shortage of medical radiations professionals include the fast growing nature of healthcare both in Australia and abroad, Australian medical radiations professionals taking up work overseas6 and the increased demand for medical radiations professionals. The Australian Institute of Radiography’s Radiation Therapy Advisory Panel declared in their July 2001 report that one of the three main problems in the radiation oncology infrastructure in Australia was workforce shortages and in particular a shortage of radiation therapists (p79).7 The panel’s proposed workforce model incorporates time for research as well as for staff education and development. Research undertaken by
Collins, et al.\textsuperscript{13} suggests that many professionals wanted to leave their profession due to a lack of career prospects or financial reward. This is in contrast to the research undertaken by Akroyd, et al.\textsuperscript{14} They found that salary was a factor that only slightly influenced a radiographer’s commitment to an organisation. However, it should be considered that if payment across varying organisations is similar then this may be an explanation why staff may not move between organisations. Research by these authors into extrinsic and intrinsic staff rewards for radiographers found that the only area that had statistical significance as a predictor for organisational commitment, across all age groups, was extrinsic rewards.

In relation to the form of supervision; Akroyd, et al.\textsuperscript{14} found that radiographers’ perception of the degree to which support and assistance was offered by supervisors was a significant predictor of their commitment to the organisation. However, their paper does not discuss detail about what type of support was given and thus it cannot be assumed that career management was or was not part of the support provided to staff. The paper does not explore organisational commitment in relation to career ladders and opportunity for job progression specifically.

Akroyd, et al.\textsuperscript{14}, cite Mathieu and Zajac who reviewed 200 articles about organisational commitment, they concluded that the most powerful predictor for staff turnover was staff commitment to the organisation. Retention in the medical radiation profession has been explored by a number of authors.\textsuperscript{6, 9, 13} The findings were varied and included boredom, limited opportunities for career advancement, unfavourable working conditions and low pay. Vosper, et al.\textsuperscript{8} investigate a number of aspects relating to the careers and destinations of radiation therapy and radiography graduates from 1991–1998 of the University of Hertfordshire. Findings included 7.8% of respondents had left the radiography profession. Reasons included lack of promotion prospects, autonomy and challenge. Smith and Lewis\textsuperscript{14} suggest that there is high employment of graduate radiographers, leading them to question where the more experienced radiographers are going. The increased number of practices and the movement of professionals to work overseas or outside of the profession might be among the causes. Smith and Lewis explained that there is potential for radiographers to expand their role and in the process to improve outcomes for stakeholders (patients, staff, radiologists, governments, and universities). Yet the importance of radiographers to healthcare has not been well represented to either employers or government. Smith and Lewis also highlighted anecdotal evidence that suggests that radiographers in Australia have low job satisfaction.

The National Radiation Oncology Inquiry (cited by Kramer\textsuperscript{13}) identified staff shortages and the lack of modern equipment as issues affecting the radiation therapy profession in Australia. Kramer also commented on survey findings that indicate that deficiency of clear career pathway as part of the problem. Clearly defined, structured and documented career progression pathways have been suggested as a means of improving staff retention, staff satisfaction, increased productivity and better patient care in the medical radiations profession.\textsuperscript{16, 17} Peterson\textsuperscript{16} describes career ladders as ‘a mechanism for employee progression in a chosen profession’. While the article by Peterson is over a decade old, it is interesting to note that similar issues were documented by Pinette eight years later. Pinette\textsuperscript{17} also cites finding that the benefits of career ladders include increased productivity and staff motivation, enhanced job satisfaction and increased staff work versatility and flexibility. The profession, however, does not have a clearly unified approach or structure to career pathways.

Price and Masurai\textsuperscript{14} comment on the limited structure to support role extension in the profession. The authors explain that increased career advancement opportunities that arise through role extension should make the profession more appealing to potential recruits. They also note that radiography needs to invest in creating career pathways similar to other allied health professions if the profession wants to avoid recruitment and retention problems.

Role extension and role expansion are distinctly different concepts. White and McKay\textsuperscript{8} describe the terms as follows: ‘role extension involves the carrying out of tasks not included in the normal training of registration’ while ‘role extension implies any enlargement of the role within the boundaries of education, theory and practice’. There are a vast number of models currently being proposed and implemented in the profession for role extension and role expansion. For the purpose of this paper, any model where a staff member can progress their career was considered. To compare specific models is beyond this paper’s scope. However it is important to note that models vary in their ability to promote staff. Bull, as cited in Woodford,\textsuperscript{19} criticised models that are pyramid in structure, limiting the number of positions at the most advanced levels. The College of Radiographers, cited in Woodford,\textsuperscript{19} identified that a reduction in role development activities can occur when staff shortages exist, as time and resources for education activities are limited.

Many authors consider that the medical radiation professions are still emerging or that there is a need to increase professional recognition.\textsuperscript{7, 15–17} Gibson\textsuperscript{21} claimed that the image of the radiographer is often misunderstood and little investigation has occurred to date. Movement of workplace organisation and decision making processes away from the radiography professionals is described by Smith and Lewis\textsuperscript{14} as being ‘contrary to one of the most fundamental philosophies of professionalisation’. From the authors’ perspective this may affect staff morale and career aspirations. The profession needs to be the driving force of its own definition and not allowing others dictate where the profession is going.

Lombardo\textsuperscript{22} outlines a number of issues that are impacting on the medical radiations university programs in Australia with research by members of the profession being an area requiring attention. Salary loading is payable to staff who have completed a PhD. Upon review of the Health Services Union of Australia (Victoria-Public Sector) Interim Award, 19th August 2003,\textsuperscript{20} the actual amount of the allowance paid to a health professional who ‘holds a doctorate which is of direct relevance to his or her current position or functional work area shall be paid an allowance of 10% of the UG1 Grade 1, Year 3 rate’. At the time of publication of the award in 2003, this equated to an additional $65.23 per week (calculated using the UG1, Grade 1, Year 3 figure of $652.30 weekly wage on page 13 of the Award 2003 document). Lombardo argued that the financial rewards are poor for the time invested in completing a PhD. Lombardo also identified the high employment rate of medical radiations graduates in recent years as another deterrent to the newly qualified undertaking further study. This high employment rate of graduates in their post graduate period, along with opportunities to earn income, act as a disincentive for them to engage in research and further study at that time. Smith\textsuperscript{21} states the growing emphasis on investigation and research as the basis of clinical practice in all health professions. Medical radiations profession is no exception. Research and continuing education is important to improve the profession and patient outcomes.\textsuperscript{16, 17, 25–26} Gambling, et al.\textsuperscript{17} assert that
evidence-based practice is essential. Smith and Lewis explain that such practices are only beginning to emerge in the Australian medical radiations profession. In a study following the career paths of graduate radiographers, Vosper, et al., found that no relationship was apparent between degree classification and career progression after qualification. This begs the question of the value of higher qualifications as a means of career advancement. The question therefore remains as to how medical radiations staff members can be encouraged to be involved in further education if career advancement is not a tangible outcome for those partaking in such activities?

Creating a culture that encourages and supports staff to undertake career advancement was identified by Pinette as an important means of improving the working environment and recruiting and retaining quality staff. Role development and expansion are seen by many authors as being the direction the profession needs to take in order to recruit and retain staff and also increase patient satisfaction. Creating a clear structure through which this could be undertaken would be necessary. Continuing professional development (CPD) is the basic level required to keep staff with up-to-date professional knowledge. Every medical radiations professional should be participating in CPD activities. It is compulsory for members of the Australian Institute of Radiography to successfully complete a CPD program to maintain membership. This has been identified as both an important means of improving the working environment and recruiting and retaining staff, as well as being the direction the profession needs to take in order to recruit and retain staff and also increase patient satisfaction. Pinette et al. identified the importance of professional development as a means of improving the working environment and recruiting and retaining staff.

Conclusion

From evaluation of the literature, it has been identified that there is not a unified approach to career structure across the profession. This may be contributing to the lack of career management practice. The situation presents a unique challenge for the medical radiations profession, which is still struggling to define itself. A response is required to ensure clarification of internal and external perceptions of what defines and creates this profession. It is up to the profession to actively promote and shape its future. This necessitates that the medical radiations profession finds ways to empower its members to act as a whole, and agree upon a clear career structure and active career management. To achieve this, members will need to reflect upon the profession’s past, its present direction and define its future. Research into the current career management of medical radiations professionals needs to be undertaken. A comparison between these findings and the findings of research into career management programs of other allied health professions may be a way of establishing best practices and improving career outcomes for medical radiations professionals. Until the profession changes, it is up to individual medical radiations professionals working in Australia to insist on active career management. Individuals also need to come together as a profession to drive change and ensure the profession evolves to encompass a human resource development focus and a career structure to support this. This is a challenge that needs to be embraced and actively pursued, because, until this happens, the profession languishes as a result of the lack of structured career management.

References