

ABSTRACT

This mixed-design, descriptive study was conducted to identify perceptions of registered nurses regarding their level of autonomy in clinical practice. Staff registered nurses on three medical-surgical nursing units at a medical center in a northwestern Pennsylvania city were sampled. Data were collected using a 20-item survey instrument developed specifically for this study during a 2-week data collection period in December of 2005. Submission of a completed survey implied consent to participate. Of the 110 surveys distributed, 39 were returned, yielding a 35.5% response rate. Demographic data and responses to 13 closed-ended study items were analyzed using descriptive statistics and findings are reported in the aggregate. Responses to 2 open-ended study items were analyzed using thematic analysis and findings are reported in the narrative. Thematic analysis of responses to the statement—*I have autonomy in my clinical nursing practice on this nursing unit because*—identified that the registered nurses surveyed credit three groups of people for their sense of autonomy in clinical practice—(1) themselves, (2) physicians, and (3) nurse managers. Thematic analysis of responses to the statement—*I do not have autonomy in my clinical nursing practice on this nursing unit because*—identified that the registered nurses surveyed credit three groups of people for their lack of autonomy in clinical practice—(1) hospital administration, including nurse managers, (2) physicians, and (3) themselves. Results provide evidence that, while the 39 registered nurses surveyed believe that they have some degree of autonomy in their clinical practice, there are areas for improvement specific to enhancing the sense of clinical practice autonomy at this setting.