



New nurses expected to “hit the ground running”

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Hospital administrators expect university-trained nurses to be able to “hit the ground running.” Because of a shortage of nursing personnel and increasingly complex acute care units, there is a need for highly competent nursing graduates. Schools of nursing, it is said, should prepare graduates who can immediately step into the role of hospital staff nurse. But do recently graduated nurses feel they have been adequately prepared by their university programs to meet this challenge? Mary-Lou Ellerton and Dr. Frances Gregor of Dalhousie University’s School of Nursing investigated this question and the perceptions of recent graduates.

Newly graduated nurses on acute-care units report feeling overwhelmed by the amount and complexity of their work as RNs and learning the job by observing and questioning more experienced colleagues. “The findings of this research,” say Dr. Gregor and Ms. Ellerton, “speak to the need to prepare nurse graduates for the escalating challenges of acute care practice, where the large majority of them will work, with a more comprehensive clinical preparation.”

Dr. Gregor and Ms. Ellerton’s study is the first step in a program of research on the preparation of university-trained nurses and their transition into the hospital staff nurse role. The next phase of the work will be a pilot project to test the feasibility of engaging older, i.e., pre-retirement, staff nurses as clinical teachers to strengthen the clinical component of contemporary programs of basic nursing education and to support newly graduated nurses in their first year of practice.

The focus of beginning nurses was on the technical, procedural and organizational components of their work. Communications with patients and families, and particularly the teaching duties of nurses, was the source of much anxiety. “These nurses reported relying heavily on the routines of their experienced colleagues to ‘learn the job,’” say Dr. Gregor and Ms. Ellerton. “By six months, they reported feeling more comfortable with the routines and procedures, less reliant on others and on written sources of information. Some were beginning to enjoy the communication component of their work and saw themselves more as nurse colleagues than they had three months earlier.

“Relationships with colleagues had changed,” they added. “Now the new nurses consulted their senior nurse colleagues rather than asking them outright to solve problems. By one year, they still saw themselves as new to practice but they had reached a plateau in their learning. They felt competent as basic caregivers and had mastered the general skill set they needed. They were comfortable with physical assessment and felt they could communicate and teach competently.”

This initial study gives a composite picture of the practice of new nurses from a variety of graduates of three nursing programs in a variety of settings – a children’s hospital, adult hospital, community hospital, and a US acute care setting. Of the 100 graduates approached, 11 responded and all were interviewed three times between September 2001 and December 2002.



New graduates were asked to describe the content of their nursing practice during their first year of employment as a registered nurse and how that content changed over time; to rate the preparedness of new graduates for work as RNs and did the ratings change over time; and to describe the maturation of their nursing practice expertise across the first year of work. The researchers noted that all of the nurses interviewed were still in nursing and planned to stay in practice. Most had plans to improve their competency by beginning to become certified in a specialty and/or leadership at the unit level. Five had plans to return to school for Masters' level study.

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