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# Practice nurses experiences of mentoring undergraduate nursing students in Australian general practice

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# Practice nurses experiences of mentoring undergraduate nursing students in Australian general practice

## **Abstract**

Internationally, the delivery of health services has shifted from secondary to primary care, necessitating an exponential growth of the nursing workforce and expansion of the nursing role in general practice. This growth, and the subsequent need to develop this workforce, has created a need to expose undergraduate nurses to general practice nursing as a viable career option. Concurrently, universities are struggling to find sufficient clinical places for their undergraduate students to gain clinical experience. It is logical, therefore, to increase the number of undergraduate nursing student placements in general practice. Through qualitative research methods, this paper seeks to explore the experiences of practice nurses mentoring undergraduate students on clinical placements within the general practice setting. Findings are presented in the following three themes: (1) Promoting Practice Nursing: We really need to get students in, (2) Mentoring future co-workers: Patience and reassurance, and (3) Reciprocity in learning: It's a bit of a two way street, which show the benefits of such placements. Clinical placements in general practice settings can be mutually beneficial in terms of providing quality teaching and learning experiences for students. Conversely, the experience provides an impetus for practice nurses to maintain currency of their clinical skills and knowledge through mentoring student nurses.

## **Keywords**

practice, mentoring, nurses, undergraduate, nursing, students, australian, general, experiences

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# Practice nurses experiences of mentoring undergraduate nursing students in Australian general practice

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## Summary

Internationally, the delivery of health services has shifted from secondary to primary care, necessitating an exponential growth of the nursing workforce and expansion of the nursing role in general practice. This growth, and the subsequent need to develop this workforce, has created a need to expose undergraduate nurses to general practice nursing as a viable career option. Concurrently, universities are struggling to find sufficient clinical places for their undergraduate students to gain clinical experience. It is logical, therefore, to increase the number of undergraduate nursing student placements in general practice. Through qualitative research methods, this paper seeks to explore the experiences of practice nurses mentoring undergraduate students on clinical placements within the general practice setting. Findings are presented in the following three themes: (1) Promoting Practice Nursing: *We really need to get students in*, (2) Mentoring future co-workers: *Patience and reassurance*, and (3) Reciprocity in learning: *It's a bit of a two way street*, which show the benefits of such placements. Clinical placements in general practice settings can be mutually beneficial in terms of providing quality teaching and learning experiences for students. Conversely, the experience provides an impetus for practice nurses to maintain currency of their clinical skills and knowledge through mentoring student nurses.

## Introduction

The move to University programs for pre-registration nursing training in Australia has transformed nursing education over the past 20 years (Daly et al. 2010). Whilst student nurses once gained expertise in an apprenticeship type model, with regular clinical work interspersed with theoretical 'blocks', undergraduate nursing students now study on university campuses and have scheduled clinical exposure within their courses. This model presents a number of challenges to ensure that graduating students sufficiently integrate theory and practice to become competent beginning registered nurses (Edwards et al. 2004).

Clinical placement provides an ideal opportunity to expose students to a range of clinical experiences (Edwards et al. 2004). This exposure serves to both stimulate the integration of theory and practice and allow preconceived ideas of various clinical areas to be challenged. Additionally, a positive clinical environment can not only promote

learning, but may also influence the career choice of nursing students (Fenush & Hupcey 2008; Marsland & Hickey 2003). To date, most undergraduate clinical placements are undertaken in the acute sector (Halcomb et al. 2005). This has significant advantages given the size of acute settings which allow a university employed facilitator to support groups of nursing students within the confines of a single establishment.

Impacting the ability of universities to find sufficient clinical places for its students has been the Government mandate to increase undergraduate nurse numbers in an attempt to alleviate the growing shortage of nurses. Effectively this means that an increasing number of students are seeking placements within a fairly constant number of acute facilities. At the same time, an increasing retirement rate amongst nursing staff who have the expertise to supervise undergraduate students further reduces the ability of the practice setting to take on nursing students (Barnett et al. 2008). Exacerbating placement difficulties is the large casual workforce, shorter lengths of hospital stays and changes in models of health service delivery all of which generate competition for placement amongst academic institutions (Hall 2006). This dwindling number of placement opportunities has prompted tertiary institutions to revise their models of clinical placement and explore alternative clinical experiences for students (Price 2007).

Correlating with the shift in health care delivery from primary to secondary care has been the exponential growth of practice nursing in Australia (Halcomb Davidson Salamonson et al. 2008). Whilst nurses in general practice have become the cornerstone of primary care in the UK and New Zealand (Halcomb Davidson Salamonson et al. 2008), in Australia, the specialty has only significantly developed since the Australian Governments' Nursing in General Practice Initiative was implemented in 2001 (Price 2007). In contrast to the 2,349 nurses reported to be employed in general practice in the 2003 Practice Nurse Workforce Survey (Australian Divisions of General Practice Ltd 2003), the 2009 Workforce Survey reports a workforce of some 8,914 general practice nurses (Australian Divisions of General Practice Ltd 2009). This three-fold increase in the workforce over six years represents a significant, yet largely untapped, opportunity for clinical placement for undergraduate students. Efforts to promote practice nursing as a specialty area should not only target the existing workforce but should be directed towards those in the early stages of their career (Halcomb et al. 2006). The clinical

placement of undergraduate students is an ideal strategy to both address the issues of placement shortage and raise the awareness of the specialty.

Baglin & Rugg (2010) assert that the quality of clinical placements can directly impact on the students' ability to perform effectively in practice upon graduation. A Registered Nurse, constrained by workforce stressors, can significantly impact the students' clinical experience and can greatly influence their initial perception of nursing as a career choice and their achievement of competent skills in the practical setting (Brammer 2008). Notwithstanding these constraints, high quality clinical placement relies on universities and clinicians working together to ensure student nurses' expertise and competency is not compromised (McKenna & Wellard 2004).

Increasingly, Australian universities are recognising the potential of general practice as a site for undergraduate clinical placement. In recognition of this the Australian General Practice Network produced a guide to support student nurse clinical placement. Despite the importance of placement quality on student learning and the differences between the models used for these placements compared to the acute sector, the efficacy of these placements has not been evaluated. This paper reports on a study conducted to explore the experiences of Practice Nurses when supervising undergraduate nursing students on clinical placement in a general practice setting.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative design to gather experiential accounts in the form of narrative data from Practice Nurses who had supervised undergraduate nursing students on clinical placement in a general practice setting. This design was chosen as the exploration of this phenomenon sought to provide insights into aspects of participants' experiences that facilitate or hinder positive outcomes in learning and teaching encounters for Practice Nurses and nursing students.

### **Recruitment and data collection**

Practice Nurses were recruited via advertisements in newsletters and flyers disseminated by the Australian Practice Nurses Association and Divisions of General

Practice networks. Advertisements sought participation from Practice Nurses who had experience in supervising undergraduate nursing students in general practice placements. Interested Practice Nurses were invited to contact the principal researcher, in the first instance, for further information related to the study and to arrange a mutually convenient time for an interview. Data were collected via structured telephone interviews (Table 1) which were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription company. During the interview, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions related to their experiences of supervising undergraduate nursing students on clinical placement. Data saturation was reached after 8 interviews, however as suggested by Francis et al. (2010) a further four interviews were conducted to ensure that no new information was obtained.

### **Data analysis**

Data were subject to thematic analysis according to guidelines suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006). That is, the researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts whilst listening to the audio recordings to ensure accuracy of content and context. Content that revealed similarities in participants' experiences were extracted from the raw data and grouped into initial codes. The initial codes were then collated into potential themes. A description of each potential theme was written and the individual themes were named (Braun & Clarke 2006). Finally, analysed data were reviewed by two members of the research team and revised until consensus was reached on themes that best represented participants' accounts.

### **Rigour**

Rigour was maintained using principles of credibility and confirmability. Credibility of the study was achieved by two members of the research team individually analysing the data and developing themes (Polit & Beck 2010; Shenton 2004). Furthermore, as suggested by Polit and Beck (2010), confirmability was achieved by the use of verbatim quotes that clearly reflect the participants' voice and not simply the researchers' perceptions.

## **Ethical considerations**

Prior to recruitment, approval for the project was sought and gained from the relevant Institutional Human Ethics Committee. Informed consent was given by all who participated and participant confidentiality was maintained by data being de-identified prior to data analysis by the deletion of identifiable material (for example, names of places and people) and by use of pseudonyms to replace participants' real names.

## **Findings**

Twelve Practice Nurses from four separate Australian States participated in this study. Participants had supervised nursing students from six universities in a general practice setting. The participants had acted in this supervisory role from between 2 months and 10 years. This paper presents three themes from the findings of this study. The first two themes; Promoting Practice Nursing: *We really need to get students in*, and Mentoring future co-workers: *Patience and reassurance*, have an overarching concept of investing in the future of Practice Nursing, and demonstrate that Practice Nurses understand the importance of, and are proud of their roles. Further these themes show that participants were committed to raising their profile as Practice Nurses and saw opportunities for this through supervising and mentoring nursing students. Participants' narratives also demonstrated that despite the additional time and multiple challenges involved in supervising nursing students, they were committed to providing them with quality clinical learning experiences. The final theme, Reciprocity in learning: *It's a bit of a two way street*, represents the reciprocal nature of the learning/teaching relationship between nursing students and the Practice Nurses that supervise them in the general practice setting.

A further paper from this study will present findings that provide insights into actual and potential issues in relationships between the university and practice nurses in terms of the provision of quality clinical placements for undergraduate students.

### **Promoting Practice Nursing: *we really need to get students in***

The Practice Nurses who participated in this study articulated the importance of providing clinical placements for nursing students in the general practice setting to enhance the future of their specialty. Showing students what the Practice Nurse role

entailed was perceived by participants as a means to promote Practice Nursing as a viable career option for students.

*I mean, some of them have already decided what area they want to go into and that's fine. Some of them had never thought about doing general practice, but once they leave here they think, I might like to go back to that. That's why we're doing it, because we want to encourage more practice nurses, because we don't have enough. (Nita).*

*I think if we want to increase the profile of practice nurses we really need to get students in and make it a career path (Angela).*

*Practice nurses are - we're getting older and I just think it's wonderful to be able to have young people in and show an interest and it's good for the practice anyway...(Lavinia).*

Participants articulated a strong sense of pride in what they do and the diverse clinical experience they could offer students. Depending on the location and scope of the Practice, participants reported supervising students performing a broad range of skills. The following excerpts illuminate a sample of the diverse skills required of a Practice Nurse and the immense scope of clinical experiences nursing students are exposed to when on clinical placement in a general practice setting.

*I think it gives them a wider variety of nursing practice as against what they get in the hospitals. It's a bit like an ED department. ....You're not quite sure here what's going to walk through the door. It could be a heart attack or it could be someone bleeding to death, it could be anything (Jacqueline).*

*I've usually got three or four people lined up for dressings already, so we start them, taking dressings down, explaining about washing hands. There can often be ECGs to be done, there's respiratory function testing to be done, do a lot of workplace medicals. By a couple of days into it, if I've seen they've done a couple of audiometry or ear testing or whatever. Depending on the [student], I'll say, okay you start that medical. I'll just be watching as they're doing .... So I can keep an eye on what's going on. I give them a free rein if you like but I'm watching as well and I'm there to pull that rein back if necessary (Laura).*

The opportunity to perform diverse clinical procedures such as health assessments, ECG's, spirometry or intra muscular injections are often missed in the acute care setting. Competition amongst students to perform a new skill in the acute care arena is highly

sought after and where up to four students witness a single ECG, and other students may not have the opportunity to observe a particular skill. The lack of exposure to clinical skills has the potential to significantly impact upon the students skill development.

### **Mentoring future co-workers: *Patience and reassurance***

Participants invested their time and energy into mentoring and educating nursing students as they considered them to be future colleagues. However, whilst some participants considered the presence of students to be “*an extra pair of hands*” (Donna), most acknowledged the supervisory role was demanding on both their time and energy.

*It's [supervising nursing students] something I've wanted to do for a long time but when it happened it was a lot harder work than we were anticipating. Yeah, not taking shortcuts, making sure you explain why you're doing what you're doing and making you think about your practice, it can be very tiring (Angela).*

*I think it's just really hard. You know like a day like that would have been twice as hard because you have to stop so much because I constantly - every day before they go home I ask how did you go today? Did you have any questions? What do you want to comment on? Is there anything about my practice you want to comment on or you've got advice for me? You have to make that time. (Eliza).*

Additional challenges involved in mentoring students became evident when skill deficits were identified, with skill levels well below the standard expected of the students' academic level. Despite these challenges, participants persevered to ensure students became competent with the skills they had previously lacked.

*When they came we were just starting for our flu vaccines. It was at that point in time, that's when they hit us. They couldn't do an IMI injection before they got here. By the time they left they could do it with their eyes closed. By the time they'd finished, I'd feel confident that they knew - no more that they realised that general practice wasn't just taking blood pressures all day (Hayley).*

*I had two of them [nursing students] who had never given an injection and had never done a dressing and were about to be graduating. I cannot understand how that has happened. You know, when I questioned it, they said well, our previous placements we weren't*

*allowed because we took too much time. Well excuse me? This is what you're in placement for is to learn, so whoever you are being mentored with is not doing the right thing by you. By God after four weeks with me, they knew how to do dressings and... (Laura).*

Despite obvious stressors involved, overall, participants enjoyed supervising students and felt a sense of achievement when skill development was achieved. Furthermore, the practice nurses demonstrated their proficiency in providing students with a safe environment in which to learn and offered the following advice to their colleagues who may be about to take on a mentoring role for student nurses.

*Patience and reassurance. The two key things you need to have when you are working with students is to remember not to rush in and do it yourself and to have patience and teach them how to do it. Then take the time to actually supervise them through that experience and to reassure your students all the time..... and make sure that they're educated from the start of the procedure and confident enough to attend it. [Sharon].*

*I try to give them as much exposure to things as I can..... the first day I'll let them just observe what we're doing. If they want to bog in and help, well they can.....But then after that - well, for example, when we do the childhood vaccinations, we do them together.... (Sarah).*

### **Reciprocity in learning: *It's a bit of a two-way street***

Mutual benefits for both participants and nursing students were obvious throughout the transcripts with the practice nurses acknowledging that the mentoring they provided students was not entirely altruistic. That is, they took on the role of mentor, at least in part, to not only recruit new nurses to the General Practice setting but to also refine and update their own nursing practice.

Participants acknowledged the opportunity to further their own professional development through the mentoring of undergraduate students. They appreciated that students' knowledge may be more contemporary than their own due to the time since they completed pre-registration education and recognised the need to impart contemporary, evidenced based information to the students to ensure a quality clinical teaching and learning experience.

*I think we've been enriched by it all [supervising students] because they make you think and they make you teach and they make you know and keep up to date (Eliza).*

*Well I guess - part of it I suppose is - well not only [getting to] teach somebody else like one on one - show them new things, but also I always learn something from the student. So it's a bit of two-way street that way [Rhiannon].*

*If they are asking you questions, you have to make sure that your knowledge base is really good because you are passing on vital information for them to learn. For them also and for yourself, just realising where you also lack knowledge and how you go about chasing up that information as well. I think that's good for me and it's good for them as well to know that you can't expect that you're going to know absolutely everything all the time [Sharon].*

Participants also valued the fact that mentoring students gave them the opportunity to review their own clinical practice to ensure they were not imparting bad habits to students.

*It's actually quite good really. It makes me sort of watch what I'm doing, you know. It makes me pull myself up, .....you've got to start doing - go back to the way it should be done instead of cutting corners sometimes..... It makes me look at what I'm doing, makes me watch my practice [Jennifer].*

## **Discussion**

Previous research has shown that clinical placements are highly influential in undergraduate students skill development and provide an important foundation for professional socialisation (Chun-Heung & French 1997). Additionally, clinical placements have been reported to affect students' future career choices (McKenna & Wellard 2004). It is clear from this study that participants relished the opportunity to mentor nursing students, exposing them to diverse experiences and teaching them the multitude of skills necessary for the Practice Nurse role. Such enthusiasm has the potential to positively influence the future workforce. This is significant given the growth needed in this specialty to meet Federal government targets to improve primary care service provision across Australia.

In developing general practice placements for undergraduate nursing students several issues relating to the practicality of the work environment must be investigated (Corbett & Bent 2005). The physical constraints of the general practice setting may not always be conducive to the placement of supernumerary staff (Halcomb Davidson Griffiths et al. 2008; Senior 2008). Although a growing number of practices have dedicated spaces for nursing staff to work, space limitations continue to be reported to impact on the practice nurses role (Halcomb Davidson Griffiths et al. 2008; Senior 2008).

Another issue is the supervision and funding of these alternate placement models. Most student nurse placements are supervised by a university employed facilitator acting above the registered nurses who provides overarching facilitation of the placement. The supervision of these placements often involve groups of eight or more nursing students in placements at a single site. Most general practices could likely only support the placement of one or two students at a time. Whilst it may not be cost effective for the university to provide a facilitator in the same model as is done on larger placements, there needs to be recognition of the additional work that this places on the registered nurses in general practice. A further consideration is whilst practices receive remuneration for placement of a medical student this is not the case for a nursing student (Corbett & Bent 2005). Therefore, many may be unable to financially absorb both the cost and time of mentoring the nursing student (Corbett & Bent 2005).

Efforts to promote practice nursing as a specialty should not only target the existing workforce and those nearing retirement but should be directed towards those in the early stages of their career (Halcomb et al. 2006). In an effort to sustain the growth of general practice nursing, it must be promoted as a viable career pathway for nurses at all stages of their career trajectory (Halcomb Davidson & Patterson 2008). Furthermore, graduating nurses must be given the opportunity to utilise and apply their high level of primary and acute health care knowledge in addressing diverse and unpredictable presentations to the general practice.

The fact that Australian practice nurses are somewhat older compared to the broader Australian nursing workforce age and may not hold post graduate qualifications (Halcomb Davidson Salamonsen et al. 2008) can impact on a practice nurses decision to mentor undergraduate students. Indeed, in this study, at least half of the participants

held an undergraduate degree as their pre-registration education. This is a somewhat higher proportion of baccalaureate prepared nurses than in the general practice nurse workforce (Australian Divisions of General Practice Ltd 2009). Further investigation should be undertaken to understand the experiences of practice nurses without baccalaureate preparation providing mentoring to undergraduate students. In particular their decision making around whether or not to provide a student placement and to ensure that both practice nurses and undergraduate students are adequately supported. Regardless of the educational preparation of the Registered Nurse, it is evident that a mentor who was prepared, had realistic expectations of the students and a positive attitude are generally perceived to have the qualities required to be a good mentor (Pellatt 2006).

### **Conclusion**

The mutual benefits of clinical placement in general practice is evident in the data. That is, it is clear that providing clinical placement opportunities in general practice benefits undergraduate nursing students in terms of providing them with additional opportunities for skills consolidation and alternative employment options. Further, supervising these students was considered by Practice Nurses as being beneficial for not only their own personal development but the development of the Practice Nurse role.

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**Table 1      Question Route**

1	How many times have you had a student on clinical in your general practice?
2	Tell me about your experience of nursing students in general practice.
3	Can you describe a typical day of general practice clinical experience for your students?
4	What was the best thing about having a student on a general practice placement?
5	What was the worst thing about having a student on a general practice placement?
6	What on piece of advice would you give a student going on a general practice placement?
7	What one piece of advice would you give to a practice nurse having a student on a general practice placement?