Experiences of registered nurses in a general practice-based new graduate program: A qualitative study

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Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: https://ro.uow.edu.au/smhpapers1/1002
THE EXPERIENCES OF REGISTERED NURSES IN A GENERAL PRACTICE BASED NEW GRADUATE PROGRAM: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Nurses are increasingly needed in primary health care settings to support community-based healthcare delivery. Programs to facilitate transition of new graduate nurses are well established in acute care, however, there are few similar programs reported in settings like general practice. This paper sought to explore the experiences of new graduate registered nurses and their registered nurse mentors in a new graduate program within Australian general practice. New graduates (n=9) and their mentors participated in interviews before, during and at the conclusion of a 12-month new graduate program. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim before being analyzed using thematic analysis. Eighteen new graduate and 10 mentor interviews were conducted, revealing four themes. Preparation and Opportunities describes the influence that pre-registration education had on preparing nurses for general practice employment. Exceeding Expectations highlights the positive experiences within the program. Program Challenges draws attention to the difficulties experienced by participants, and Future Career Intentions explores future career plans. This study highlights that a general practice new graduate nurse program has the potential to build the workforce. However, strengthening undergraduate preparation of nurses around PHC and addressing funding issues in general practice, are important to promote the success of such programs.

Keywords

Nursing, primary care, new graduate, qualitative, transition, workforce, education, clinical practice
Summary Statement

What is known about the topic?

- New graduate nurses need support as they transition into clinical practice to ensure that they deliver safe and effective nursing care.

What does this paper add?

- This paper presents nurse’s experiences of participating in a new graduate transition program in general practice, highlighting both the benefits and the challenges, as well as its impact on their career choices. Understanding these issues will inform the development of sustainable and robust programs to support transition of future new graduates into this setting.
Introduction

Globally, there is a strategic shift in health systems towards the provision of primary health care (PHC) to manage the complexities of an ageing population and the increasing burden of chronic diseases (World Health Organization, 2008). Associated with this has been the introduction of health workforce models encompassing multidisciplinary, team based approaches to meet the needs of local communities (McInnes 2015). Internationally, PHC nurses comprise a significant non-physician workforce providing care within general practices (Freund et al. 2015). In Australia, these practices are predominately small businesses owned and operated by groups of general practitioners with support from nurses, allied health professionals and administrative staff (Australian Government Department of Health, 2015a). Nurses are increasingly playing an important role in general practice providing a range of services including health promotion, wound care, specialist clinics and chronic disease management (Freund et al. 2015; Australian Primary Care Nurses Association 2019). In 2015, Primary Health Networks (PHN) were established by the Australian Government to work with general practices to improve coordination and integration of PHC across local communities, and to address service gaps (Australian Government Department of Health, 2015b).

Recruiting and retaining a skilled nursing workforce is essential to ensure the sustainability of a robust PHC system (Australian Government Department of Health, 2013). While general practice nursing has long been a feature of UK and New Zealand primary care, the size of the Australian PHC nursing workforce has increased exponentially in order to meet growing demand (Halcomb et al. 2016). More than 14,000 nurses now identify as working in general practice, compared to fewer than 2,500 nurses a decade ago (Australian Primary Care Nurses Association 2019). As PHC continues to grow, attention has been given to developing workforce strategies that will ensure sufficient nurses with the right skills are available into the future. This has included enhancing the PHC content in the undergraduate nursing curricula (Ali et al. 2011; Keleher et al. 2010)(Authors own), and offering clinical placements in PHC for pre-registration nurses to experience working in the sector (Bloomfield et al. 2018; McInnes et al. 2015a, 2015b; Phafoli et al. (2018).
Until recently, recruitment and retention strategies have largely focused on employing registered nurses from the acute care sector (Ashley et al. 2016). However, there have been some PHC new graduate (NG) transition programs developed, such as those offered in New Zealand (Gibbs 2010; Pearson and Holloway 2006) and more recently in Australia (Aggar et al. 2017; Thomas et al. 2018), with the aim to attract new graduates directly into PHC employment.

Transitioning to employment is known to be challenging for new graduate nurses (Boychuk Duchscher and Cowin, 2006), who traditionally commence their careers in acute care settings (Rush et al. 2015). Much of the transition literature, therefore, focuses on the experiences of neophyte nurses in hospital settings (Rush et al. 2015). Common concerns reported by these new nurses include: time management; competing demands; lack of support and feedback; lack of confidence, and emotional reactions (Henderson et al. 2015; Walton et al. 2018). Poor transition experiences are reported to impact negatively on job satisfaction and retention rates (Ashley et al. 2018; Parker et al. 2010).

Unique challenges have been associated with experienced nurses transitioning from acute to PHC roles (Ashley et al. 2016; Holt 2008). These include: role ambiguity; changes in scopes of practice; adapting to working in small business environments, and difficulties accessing professional learning (Halcomb et al. 2009). In consideration of these challenges, the development of new graduate transition programs in PHC settings require establishment of partnerships across small businesses, suitable learning environments, professional support, and opportunities to maximise exposure to a range of clinical conditions.

Australia’s first pilot graduate program, reported by Aggar et al. (2017) and Thomas et al. (2018), demonstrates that general practice settings provide a suitable environment for new graduates to develop competence, and that additional positive outcomes resulted from the experiences of the new graduate’s preceptors. The qualitative study reported in this paper sought to more deeply investigate the experiences of a larger cohort of new graduate registered nurses and their registered nurse mentors longitudinally across a yearlong new graduate program conducted between February 2017 and February 2018 within Australian general practice.
Methods

Design

This study adopted a longitudinal qualitative descriptive approach to capture a full range of the participant’s views, thoughts and experiences. As described by Sandelowski (2000), qualitative description offers a comprehensive summary of the phenomenon under investigation by interpreting and presenting participant experiences as they occur. Descriptive validity is achieved through the accurate recounting of events and presenting rich descriptions embedded within a sociocultural context (Sandelowski 2000; Magilvy and Thomas 2009).

Program overview

This program was externally funded and conducted within a single Primary Health Network (PHN) in Sydney, Australia. The PHN in this study services seven local government areas and has a catchment population of 922,896 and a geographic area spanning 6,243sq km (South Western Sydney PHN 2019). Staff employed by the PHN administered the program, delivered the education materials and provided clinical support to the new graduates and mentors. The program included an introductory education day, two-week paid supernumerary period at the start of each rotation, a two-day ‘orientation to general practice’ workshop and four education days for each new graduate. Two six-month employment contracts were offered to each new graduate, with the aim of providing two rotations across different practice environments. Three weeks of annual leave were included in the program. There was no guarantee of ongoing employment at the completion of the program. Mentors were registered nurses working in general practice and were provided with a 2.5-hour workshop on mentoring at the commencement of the program. Mentors were also invited to attend the education days with the new graduate.

Setting and participants

All general practices within the PHN were advised about the program, with a view to
contract up to 10 general practices. To be eligible, practices were required to have an
experienced RN on staff who was willing to act as a mentor and offer two six-month
contracts for a new graduate nurse.

New graduate nurse participants in this study graduated from three different Higher
Education Institutions (HEIs) located in New South Wales, Australia. New Graduates
were selected based on formal job applications submitted to an external provider for a
new graduate position in general practice. An interview process ranked candidates
and offers were made sequentially.

**Data collection**

An interview schedule was developed by experts in qualitative methods and general
practice research. Interviews were conducted before program commencement, at the
program mid-point (6 months) and on completion (12 months). New graduates and their
mentors were contacted about participating in the interviews at each time point. Where
new graduate nurses left the program, attempts were made by the research team to
conduct follow-up interviews to identify reasons for exiting the program.

Interviews were undertaken via telephone at a mutually convenient time using a semi-
structured interview schedule. Each interview schedule was designed for a particular
time point. Items sought to explore the participants’ current experiences and thoughts,
using sample questions presented in Table 1;

Table 1: sample of new graduate and mentor interview schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Graduate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview 1: Pre commencement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Can you tell me about why you applied for a new graduate position in general practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What is your understanding about the role of nurses in general practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do you feel prepared to work in a primary care setting? Why / Why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What do you think might be your biggest challenge in being a new graduate in general practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview 2: Six months</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How would you describe your experience? What happened to make you feel this way?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. How does the experience that you have had compare to your expectations?
7. How did your General Practice assist you in the transition to graduate practice?

Interview 3: Twelve months
8. How did the experience of your second rotation compare to your first rotation?
9. Now that you have completed the program what do you think about continued employment in general practice nursing?
10. What would you say to a new grad who was contemplating applying for a new grad program in general practice next year?

Mentor
Interview 1: Pre commencement
1. What prompted you to become a new graduate mentor?
2. Have you had any past experience in working with new graduates in general practice?
3. What do you think are going to be the biggest challenges for new graduates working in the general practice setting?
4. Do you think that the new graduates will be prepared for general practice work in terms of clinical skills and knowledge?

Interview 2: Six months
5. How does the experience that you have had compare to your expectations?
6. How did your general practice assist you in supporting the new graduate?
7. What lessons have you learnt from this experience to inform others in future mentoring of new graduates?

Interview 3: Twelve months
8. Now that you have completed the program what do you think about providing a new graduate program for nurses in general practice?
9. What would you say to a new graduate who was contemplating applying for a program next year?
10. What would you say to a mentor who was contemplating applying for a program next year?

Prompts such as “Can you tell me more about ….” Or “What do you mean when you say…..” were used to encourage participants to expand on their responses.

Interviews were digitally audio-recorded before being transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service.

Data analysis

Transcripts were analysed using a process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The research team comprised three registered nurse academics with experience in
qualitative and primary health care research. A fourth team member had extensive experience in supporting nurses entering primary health care employment. Two members of the research team conducted interviews. All team members read the transcripts separately to identify repeated content and patterns. Team members jointly discussed themes and identified examples of each from participants’ quotations. Once developed, each theme was further reviewed and confirmed as credible by the team.

Ethical Considerations

Approval to conduct this study was received from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of XXX. Interviewers were independent of PHN staff and were conducted individually at a mutually agreeable time. Participation in each interview was voluntary and participation did not influence new graduate progression in the program or the professional position of mentors. All personal or potentially identifying information was removed from transcripts and pseudonyms were given to protect identification of individuals. Transcripts and audio were stored on a password encrypted computer located on the university premises.

Results

Participants

Nine new graduates commenced the program, supported by nine registered nurse mentors. Four (44.4%) new graduates completed the 12-month program. Eight (89%) new graduates participated in pre-commencement interviews, six interviews (67%) were undertaken at the end of the first rotation and 4 (44%) were conducted at the conclusion of the program. Interviews with new graduates lasted between 18 and 54 minutes (average 30 minutes). Ten mentor interviews were completed, seven (78%) being undertaken at the commencement of the program, two (22%) at the end of the first rotation, and one (11%) at the program completion. The average duration of mentor interviews was 14 minutes. Mentors reported heavy workloads and staff shortages as
barriers to their participation and expanded responses in these interviews.

Themes

Four themes emerged from the data. *Preparation and Opportunities* describes the influence that tertiary education and undergraduate clinical placements in general practice had on preparing nurses for work in general practice. *Exceeding Expectations* offers insight into the positive experiences of the new graduate and mentor participants. *Program Challenges* highlights difficulties experienced by participants, and *Future Career Intentions* explores how the program influenced participants’ future career plans.

a) *Preparation and Opportunities*

New graduate participants articulated that they had limited understanding of general practice nursing or the role they would be required to perform at the commencement of the program.

“I mean, I did a bit of a Google search and that helped me (NG: Holly)”.

“I didn’t know these positions existed and I fell across it on the internet (NG: Cathy)”.

“I found out about the program and then I researched into what stuff I would be doing (NG: Leanne)”.

New graduates revealed that undergraduate education largely prepared them for acute care employment. Indeed, few participants had experienced a PHC placement during their undergraduate education.

“Uni very much just talks about the hospital system, the hospital system, the hospital system; or mental health (NG: Holly)”.

“the focus [at uni] is on mostly hospital and high acuity care. That’s the things they dwell on because they expect all the new grad nurses to go and start at the hospital. No-one really thinks about them starting in
Having little exposure to PHC during their pre-registration education limited the new graduate participants’ understanding of potential career pathways and workplace opportunities away from traditional acute care settings.

“You come to uni and you do all this study and they keep putting you in placements in hospitals and they say to you, you'll be a nurse, you're going to work shift work, you're going to get really tired, you're going to be a hero without a cape. This is what nurses do. You've got to work in a hospital for 12 months and then decide what it is you want to do after that. I never ever expected that I could walk straight into primary health (NG: Cathy)”.

However, for those who had experienced an undergraduate clinical placement in primary care, this experience encouraged their desire to work in this setting.

“I was really interested in primary care and it wasn't until I guess my last placement [at uni] where I had a chance to work in semi-community clinic type setting and I really loved it. Yeah that's why I applied for this (NG: Aimee)”.

It was evident that some new graduate participants were concerned that they might appear incompetent and be seen to be lacking the clinical skills to work in primary care.

“Let's be honest, I haven't independently changed a wound dressing. At my uni, I did it on a dummy (NG: Cathy)”.

“I was quite nervous when I first started, I didn’t know what I was going to do (NG: David)”.

Pre-commencement interviews also exposed anxieties about having insufficient support. Concern about being accepted into small teams and workplace culture also generated anxieties among new graduate participants.

“We've always had placements at hospitals and gone to different wards. We adapt the team to understand the work environment, but there's a lot of people in a ward and you can depend on a few different RNs to help
you out here and there. In a medical practice there's fewer team members so I just really hope that they like me and I can adapt into their work culture and do my best (NG: David)".

RN mentors also described having little understanding of a new graduate’s skills or understanding of contemporary nurse education.

“For me as a preceptor with a new grad I'm like well, how much do they know, what did they learn at uni? Did they learn the same as I learnt? (M: Sharon)".

Additionally, general practices often lacked policies and resources to support new graduate nurses:

“We [GPNs] would explain to her [NG] and say look, you are the first one in here, so we don't know what to do but we're going to try to set up some guides or try to set up a plan and then we can work on that (M: Sharon)".

b) Exceeding Expectations

As they progressed through the program, new graduate participants reflected on their skill development and the stigma often associated with nursing in general practice.

“The way that general practice is often viewed is not in a positive light. It's like the place that nurses go to die or to end their careers. In terms of career progression, there's not really super huge amounts of information out there of how you can proceed, but I feel like as soon as I started, I definitely didn't feel that way at all. I felt like I was able to actually use my skills and my knowledge (NG: Holly)".

“It exceeded my expectations … (NG: Jess)".

Diverse patient presentations requiring a range of skills for patients across the lifespan were articulated as positive elements of working in the general practice setting.

“They say on ward nursing you see something different every day, but I actually saw something diversely different every single day. It was
Workplace culture and acceptance into the team were seen as crucial in optimising the new graduates experience in general practice. Mentors recognised this and from the outset sought to make the experience meaningful.

“I think my main role in this program would be to make sure that I let the new grad have an enjoyable experience, to be honest, because this is your first point of call, really, to the real world of nursing whether it be going back into the hospital system or staying in general practice, wherever it might be. This is it, this is going to stick with them for their whole career (M: Sharon)”.  

New graduate participants confirmed that support from mentors and practices was key to a positive experience of the program and provided new graduates with the confidence to work autonomously.

“I absolutely loved it. I was fortunate to have the most fantastic mentor. She was an absolute inspiration. That really increased my passion in general practice. It was wonderful to have that support. Also, she gave me the independence as well to practise on my own (NG: Karen)”.  

“I think I had more respect and just the assistance and encouragement that I got from the GP [general practitioner]. Yeah, definitely. I didn't expect him or any of them to be so proactive in wanting to teach me either (NG: Cathy)”.  

One of the more rewarding aspects of the program was that several new graduates felt they had developed the skills and confidence to initiate new health programs. The following excerpts illuminate the depth of their skill development and ways that new graduate participants developed business plans to change practices.

“I've put systems in place for spirometry that they [mentors] didn't know about. I've shown them how to, or where to source information and how to educate patients on the correct use of devices (NG: Cathy)”.  

“We got rid of the steriliser machine finally because one of the doctors
there was still using old IUD equipment that was re-sterilised; I made an excel spreadsheet about just numbers about how much it would cost to maintain versus just buying disposable and then they agreed to get rid of the machine (NG: David)

Mentors also expressed how their involvement in the program had exceeded their expectations, providing them and the workplace with opportunities to learn from the new graduates.

“it’s quite a pleasant experience. I shared my experience..[and] got new ideas from the students coming in (M: Sharon).”

“they come all nice and fresh and have great new ideas and things, so that is a bonus (M: Sarah)”. 

“it was a positive experience. I didn’t have any negative situations. It’s good for the practice, for me, for the patients, everything like that (M: Fran)”.

**c) Program Challenges**

Challenges associated with the program were identified by both the mentors and new graduates. For some mentors, the program provided their first mentoring experience, and not all were enthusiastic participants or given a choice about their involvement.

“I didn't actually request to be one [a mentor], my boss just told me that we were getting a new grad nurse and that was it (M: Sarah)”. 

A further challenge related to the GPs’ lack of understanding about the new graduate scope of practice. Despite program information about new graduate competencies being provided to the practices, participants reported that they were often expected to undertake clinical tasks which they did not feel competent to perform, such as immunisations, ear syringing, complex dressings and blood collection.

“one of the doctors..[says] oh you do cannulas; how come you can’t just take
血液？我就像，嗯，我还没有完成我的课程。我可以插入导管，但我必须完成课程[之前]我才能合法地为患者抽取血液（NG: David）。

叙述也表明，个体实践的工作量和患者病情可能影响实习体验。

"这是这个轮转明显不如我的第一次实习，因为这次只有一个医生。只有三个。大多数患者都很年迈，但他们来取药和其他类似的东西（NG: David）"。

**d) Future Career Intentions**

在反思他们在课程中的经历时，新毕业生参与者表达了对课程及提供的支持来促进其护理职业生涯的满意度。

"我非常感谢这些技能，因为我认为我现在工作的地方比我以前更好。我不会为了其他任何东西而交换这些技能（NG: Peter）"。

虽然只有50%的新毕业生完成了该课程，但那些提前离开的人要么在普通科或急症科找到了永久性的工作，要么离开了通过课程提供的临时合同。对于那些留在课程中的人来说，他们强烈希望继续在普通科工作。

"我确实想留在普通科……我绝对喜欢它（NG: Karen）"。

继续在普通科就业的主要复杂性是薪酬，普通科与急诊科之间薪酬和条件的差距。

"我最大的挑战是因为我要在这里多呆一段时间，我希望（NG: Karen）"。

"我确实想留在普通科……我绝对喜欢它（NG: Karen）"。

"我确实想留在普通科……我绝对喜欢它（NG: Karen）"。
to ask for a pay rise, but I have no idea how to do that because the pay is like - it’s not that great (NG: David)”. “the only reason I’d want to be in a hospital is to make more money (NG: Cathy)”. 

Discussion

The findings of this study support previous research that general practice employment offers an attractive career option for new graduate nurses (McInnes et al. 2015; Peters et al. 2015; Aggar et al. 2017; Thomas et al. 2018). While some participants indicated an intention to gain future acute care employment, they did not feel that a primary care transition program was a barrier to this. Indeed, most new graduate participants felt that they had developed a broad scope of skills in general practice. This contrasts with findings by Thomas et al. (2018) who suggest that an acute-care hospital transition program to professional practice was necessary to gain adequate nursing skills, even if the nurse intended to have a future career in primary health care.

This study identified a lack of preparation and understanding about general practice nursing in undergraduate programs, supporting other reports that undergraduate nursing education focuses on acute care nursing (Ali et al. 2011; Ashley et al. 2017; McInnes et al. 2015a)(Bloomfield et al. 2018)(Authors own). To ensure a viable primary health care nursing workforce to meet future projected health care needs, tertiary institutions need to promote the opportunities for employment in primary health care nursing and ensure that graduates have the knowledge, skills and confidence to practice in diverse clinical settings.

New graduate participants emphasised the value they placed on the support provided by their mentors and builds on previous research relating to mentoring in diverse new graduate workplaces (Ashley et al. 2018; Dadiz & Guillet, 2015; McInnes et al. 2015b; Tracey and McGowan 2015)(Aggar et al. 2017; Bloomfield et al. 2018). Studies into mentoring in acute care settings support findings from this study that mentors must be involved in establishing expectations for the mentee, and are provided with support to mentor effectively (Kalischuk et al. 2013; Staykova et al. 2013). This includes regular
liaison with course conveners, formal peer support, and protected time to discuss and complete relevant documentation and reports. As noted in this study, without such support, disengagement from the role is likely to occur (Kalischuk et al. 2013). While barriers exist around providing time and funding for nurse mentors employed in general practice to engage in such work there is strong evidence for the value in adopting a collaborative approach to mentoring (Richards and Bowles 2012).

Several participants spoke about the negative perceptions of nursing in general practice. This resonates with previous literature that has described nursing in general practice as a ‘pre-retirement option’ or place for a rest from acute nursing (Ashley, Peters, et al. 2018; Thomas et al. 2018). Perceptions held by nurses, academics and others around the general practice nurse role and career pathways in primary health care need urgent attention to promote this as a viable career opportunity for nurses at any stage of their career (Ali et al. 2011; Ashley et al. 2018)(Thomas et al. 2018).

Remuneration was a further consideration impacting on future career intentions of new graduates in this study. The pay and conditions of nurses employed in Australian general practice have previously been demonstrated to be inferior to their acute care counterparts (Ashley, Halcomb, et al. 2018; McInnes et al. 2017; McInnes et al. 2015b)(Bloomfield et al. 2018). Policy makers, nursing organisations and general practices need to explore options for structural change to better support new graduates by providing secure, adequately remunerated employment.

**Limitations**

This study reports the experience of a small number of new graduate nurses and RN mentors participating in a transition to practice program within general practices across a single PHN. While generalizability of the data is strengthened by these participants graduating from three different HEIs, findings from this small cohort may not be transferable to other jurisdictions or countries. Additionally, while multiple attempts were made to contact all participants at each time point, not all participants engaged in the complete series of interviews. However, given that qualitative description allows for small sample size (Magilvy and Thomas 2009), the research team are confident that the data reflects the views, thoughts and experiences of participating new graduate
registered nurses and their registered nurse mentors.

**Conclusion**

This study reveals that a new graduate program in general practice can provide a means to address shortages in the GPN workforce. Greater attention to the preparation of new graduate nurses for employment in primary health care settings can assist in developing new graduates who are work ready and able to meet workforce demands. Additionally, strategies that link experienced nurses with Schools of Nursing can assist in ensuring the clinical currency of programs, the engagement of experienced nurses with contemporary education and the development of mentor skills. Exploring strategies for the funding and employment of new graduate nurses in PHC transition programs in small business environments, has the potential to enhance recruitment and retention of graduates.

**Competing interests:** Nil

**Acknowledgements:** The research team sincerely thanks South West Sydney Research Small Research Grant for funding this study and to all the participants who agreed to be interviewed.
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