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Abstract

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Background: General practice nurses have become increasingly important in providing community-based care, in response to the growing burden of chronic conditions and the ageing population. To sustain this workforce, there is a need to optimise strategies to promote a consistent supply of new graduate nurses.

Design: This qualitative descriptive study was undertaken within a sequential explanatory mixed methods project.

Methods: Data were collected through semi-structured telephone interviews with sixteen final-year nursing students from five Australian universities. Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: Four main themes were identified, namely; a) general practice is not a priority career path, b) opportunities for skills development and consolidation, c) perceptions of employment conditions, and d) transition support is limited.

Conclusion: To meet current workforce needs in areas with increasing demand, nurse educators need to support undergraduate nursing students to explore a wide range of career pathways following graduation. Informed career choices and well-structured educational preparation during undergraduate education may be an effective strategy in building a sustainable future workforce in settings such as general practice.

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Title: NEW GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT IN GENERAL PRACTICE: PERCEPTIONS OF FINAL-YEAR NURSING STUDENTS

Running Head: Students' perceptions of a general practice career

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Criteria	Author Initials
Made substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data	KC, AW, SM, EH
Involved in drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content	KC, AW, SM, EH
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Agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.	KC, AW, SM, EH

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1. Introduction

The growing burden of chronic conditions, combined with an ageing population, has driven the focus of healthcare delivery towards the community (World Health Organization, 2018). This has increased demand for services such as general practice. As a first-line healthcare provider, over 88% of Australians access general practice services annually (Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, 2018). Similar to the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand (NZ), Australian general practices are often owned by general practitioners (GPs) and operated either within a small business structure or as part of a corporate chain (Halcomb et al., 2018). Most general practices, in countries such as Australia, UK, and NZ, employ at least one nurse (Freund et al., 2015).

The general practice nurse (GPN) role has been firmly established in both the UK and NZ, in contrast with Australia where it has developed over the past two decades. Australian GPNs have developed their role in preventive health, chronic disease management, and acute presentations. In Australia, GPNs either hold a baccalaureate degree or equivalent (Registered Nurse RN), or a diploma (Enrolled Nurse EN). Nurses most frequently enter general practice employment following work experience in hospital settings, with few new graduate nurses employed in this setting (Ashley et al., 2018). This is largely attributed to the limited pathways for new graduate nurses in general practice (Aggar et al., 2017; McInnes et al., 2019). This is particularly concerning given the GPN shortage, ageing GPN workforce, and predominately part-time and casual nursing employment arrangements (Aggar et al., 2017; Heywood & Laurence, 2018). One workforce development strategy is to ensure a consistent flow of new graduate nurses seeking employment across clinical areas and, in particular, in areas of known or predicted shortages. To sustain and replenish the GPN workforce, it is important to understand the issues that influence undergraduate students' career choices.

2. Background

Nursing registration entitles graduate nurses to practise in many different settings (Schwartz, 2019). As such, graduate nurses are faced with a wide variety of career choices, including hospital settings and community-based primary health care services such as general practice (McInnes et al., 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2016).

There is growing evidence exploring the preferences of final-year undergraduate nursing students regarding employment following graduation (Matarese et al., 2019; Shoqirat & Abu-Qamar, 2015), and the relative attractiveness of different clinical settings (Matarese et al., 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2016). Internationally, aged care and mental health are the least preferred career options among undergraduate nursing students (Matarese et al., 2019; Shen & Xiao,

2012). In contrast, high tech areas including emergency departments, intensive care, operating theatres (Matarese et al., 2019), paediatrics and maternity are often reportedly preferred by students (Shen & Xiao, 2012). While there is limited research (Calma, Halcomb & Stephens, 2019), few undergraduate nursing students report an intention to seek employment in community-based settings (Bloomfield et al., 2018; Bloomfield et al., 2015). This mirrors the recent State of the World's Nursing Report which highlighted the maldistribution of nurses given preferences to work in hospital settings (World Health Organization, 2020).

Various factors are known to influence nursing students' career choices. Gender, age and personal qualities may shape career decisions (Bloomfield et al., 2018; Chai et al., 2019; Matarese et al., 2019). Additionally, clinical placement experiences (Chai et al., 2019), knowledge of the practice area (de Guzman et al., 2013), expectations around working conditions (Bloomfield et al., 2018), curriculum foci and expertise of academic staff (Hunt et al., 2020) impact on decision making. To maintain a sustainable nursing workforce, it is important to understand final-year undergraduate nursing students' perceptions of general practice as a career choice, and the issues that influence these perceptions.

3. Aim

This paper investigates final-year undergraduate nursing students' perceptions of general practice nursing as a new graduate career path.

4. Methods

4.1 Study Design

A qualitative descriptive study was undertaken in a sequential explanatory mixed methods project following an online survey of final-year undergraduate nursing students. To explore survey findings interviews were undertaken with a sub-group of survey participants. A qualitative descriptive approach provided an extensive yet straightforward description of experiences (Sandelowski, 2010). Survey data have been reported separately (Calma et al., 2021b). This paper reports on interview data related to participants perceptions of general practice nursing as a new graduate career path. Discrete data about perceptions of the GPN role also emerged from the interviews and are reported elsewhere (Calma et al., 2021a). The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) was used in this study.

4.1 Participants

Final-year Bachelor of Nursing (BN) students from five universities in NSW, Australia were recruited. Potential participants either received a direct email from their faculty or the survey

was promoted on learning platforms. Participants provided contact details on survey completion if they were interested in interview participation.

Survey participants who indicated a willingness to be interviewed were stratified into low, mid and high intention to work in general practice based on the modified 14-item Attitudes, Subjective Norms, Perceived Behavioural Control, and Intention to Pursue a Career in Mental Health Nursing (ASPIRE) scale (Wilbourn et al., 2018). A high score is indicative of a greater intention to work in general practice. The doctoral candidate (KC) contacted potential participants from the three career intention groups. Once study information was provided and informed consent was gained, an appointment for the interview was arranged. Participants were recruited until no new information was revealed and data saturation was reached.

4.3 Data Collection

The doctoral candidate (KC), a registered nurse with qualitative descriptive research experience, conducted all interviews via telephone due to participants' geographical dispersion. The other members of the team were female registered nurses and academics who have experience in qualitative descriptive research in primary health care. Interviews followed a semi-structured interview schedule developed from a literature review (Calma, Halcomb & Stephens, 2019) and survey findings. The schedule included open-ended items such as, "Tell me, how do you feel about general practice nursing as a career choice for new graduate nurses?", and probing questions such as "what aspects are most/least appealing to you about general practice as a career choice?". Interviews were digitally audio-recorded and field notes were kept. Transcripts were not returned to participants given interviews were conducted at the end of their study year.

4.4 Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription company. Data were then analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were initially read (KC) whilst listening to the audio recordings to establish accuracy. Field notes and transcripts were then read and re-read to establish familiarity. Initial codes, patterns and meanings were independently identified (KC) and cross-checked (EH, AW, SM). Codes were organised into potential themes by manually collating coded interview extracts. Initial themes were identified and developed into a coding framework by all researchers, and these were cross-checked against the transcripts and discussed until congruence was reached. The 'meaning' of each theme was discussed until consensus was reached and final titles determined (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.5 Rigour

Trustworthiness was established using the criteria described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was established by comparing the audio data and transcripts and using peer-debriefing, where the team conferred on raw data, codes and themes. Providing a detailed description of participants and presenting verbatim quotes demonstrated transferability. A detailed description of study processes established dependability. Finally, providing an audit trail and cross-checking codes established confirmability.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Approval was gained from the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 2018/556). The research aim, benefits and potential risks to participants were included in the information sheet and consent form. Participation was voluntary and, although participants could cease the interview at any time, none chose to do so. Identifying information was removed from transcripts. Pseudonyms are used in reporting.

5. Findings

Of the 16 participants, only one identified as male (6.3%). Participants ranged in age from 20-54 years (Mean 31.1 years). Eleven (68.8%) participants reported having no general practice clinical experience. Two participants (12.5%) had worked as a receptionist, and two (12.5%) had worked as Enrolled Nurses in general practice. Only one (6.3%) participant had undertaken a general practice clinical placement as part of their undergraduate education.

Four main themes emerged, namely: a) general practice is not a priority career path, b) Opportunities for skills development and consolidation, c) perceptions of employment conditions, and d) transition support is limited.

5.1 General Practice is Not a Priority Career Path

When considering career options, several participants reported prioritising hospital settings for initial employment. General practice was frequently viewed through a negative lens, or as a 'back-up option', if hospital employment was not secured.

“Most people I think have a pretty negative view of being a nurse in general practice. It seems to be nobody's first choice of job.” [Lorraine]

“It's not looked upon... as a priority of a job...I think a lot of people go into nursing thinking that working in a ward is the goal. So working in other areas, whether that be community nursing or GP practices or anything like that, almost feels as though they haven't met that goal.” [Denise]

Most perceptions of general practice as a career path were not informed by direct experiences in the setting. Bronte, for example, described that she has *“never been in the general practice on placement”* and that she did *“not know much... I really don't know what the range of prospects for nursing is in general practice”*.

Participants reported that the initial prioritisation of career path was influenced by the extent to which academic staff portrayed a particular clinical setting as important, and provided content and promotion of the setting in coursework. An absence of general practice content, and a lack of general practice career advice or promotion in some undergraduate programs, negatively influenced perceptions of general practice as a career option.

“It's absolutely not something we're prepared for at Uni I think in any way whatsoever.” [Lorraine]

“When it came to applying for new grads and for jobs there was no one that came and talked to us about this.” [Anne]

Limited promotion of general practice as a career path resulted in some participants assuming that work in general practice required specialist qualifications.

“I think it's just I assumed that it's a closed-door for me, and you'd have to specialise to be able to have that as an option.”
[Anne]

5.2 Opportunities for Skills Development and Consolidation

Many participants described seeking initial employment based on perceived opportunities to consolidate fundamental skills and to learn new nursing skills. Views on which clinical setting best supported skill consolidation and development varied. Some participants articulated that general practice would expose them to diverse skills that may not be available in hospital settings.

“I think it's a great learning curve... There's a lot of stuff to be learned that they [new graduates] would not be exposed to on a daily basis on the wards.” [Paula]

“General practice nursing would be really beneficial for a new grad nurse... you get a broad range of skills.” [Jessica]

Several participants perceived general practice as a ‘stepping stone’ for new graduates, rather than a career option. Olivia described several nurses who worked in general practice *“while*

they're waiting for a new grad and...they actually say they learnt a lot and it built their confidence quite a bit more." She expanded on this perception:

"I feel like especially it's a way for you to start thinking – especially people who are not too confident in talking to patients it's a starter option...to build up your confidence... it's taking those steps towards being a full on registered nurse at a hospital." [Olivia]

In contrast, other participants expressed concerns about losing clinical skills if they were employed in general practice following graduation, particularly concerning how this might impact on future employment opportunities. These views, however, were not always founded on personal general practice experience.

"The thing that would scare me the most about general practice is losing all of the other skills that you wouldn't be able to practise there such as basic patient daily care, knowing some of your medications since you're not constantly dispensing those medications... if you do decide to move on, you'd have an adjustment period where you're relearning some of these skills." [Olivia]

"I wouldn't say deskill or you won't use what you have studied because for myself now I'm thinking, oh, I want to go to the hospital system first so you basically learn about everything, all the acute symptoms and all the skills, gather it all before going to GP nursing...if you go straight into GP nursing you might not use or learn all those skills or acquire the skills that you need to go into hospital nursing." [Bronte]

Denise commented that *"there probably is less learning opportunities [in general practice]...as what you would get in a hospital"*. To these participants, it was important that working in hospital settings always remained a viable career option in the future.

For some, acute care experience was perceived as a *"good training ground"* [Celestine] for new graduate nurses to consolidate skills before moving into other settings. Many participants perceived that fundamental skills could only be consolidated through hospital experience, with limited recognition that other clinical settings could offer opportunities for skills consolidation. Lorraine perceived that; *"It's very much a case of you need to be in a hospital, you need to get your acute care experience, you need to know how to measure medications, you need to know how to do IV fluid"*. Faye also shared her perceptions;

“[In the ward you learn] time management; critical thinking; when to escalate; knowing how to escalate; who to go to and ensuring the proper processes are done. Everything; everyday basic nursing.”

While some participants verbalised interest in working in general practice in the future, this would only occur after they had gained hospital experience. Celestine identified that *“even if it's only short term, even if it's only six months of a new grad year...where you rotate a couple of times”*, one could *“do six months in a hospital and then go on to your general practice... [but] I just think you see so much [working in the hospital]”*. She expanded on this saying:

“I definitely think being in a hospital where you can just ask a lot of questions is a really good place for a new grad to start. I mean GP practice is a great long term career choice and maybe that's even something I'll seek out.”

5.3 Perceptions of Employment Conditions

Three main issues around employment conditions influenced participants' perceptions, namely: work-life balance, salary, and workplace pressure. Establishing a work-life balance was important for several participants who perceived general practice employment as a *“healthier choice”* [Hailey] as it facilitated such balance. Celestine described that *“the hours would be much better”* in general practice, and Denise identified *“it's such a great lifestyle [because] it is a nine to five job”*. Participants described work-life balance as an important consideration when they experienced concurrent family commitments. Maggie stated that she would consider general practice employment *“Definitely in the long term, in the future, definitely a good job, just for the hours too if you've got family, kids”*. Similarly, Hailey identified that *“my family comes first and this area of practice might allow me to make my dreams come true, you know?”*. Denise agreed saying general practice nursing isn't *“something that they were willing to go into straight away – but potentially down the track when they didn't want to be doing shift hours.”*

Discrepancies between the remuneration for GPNs compared to hospital nurses reduced the attractiveness of general practice employment. Lorraine articulated; *“the pay rate in general practice is not as good as a hospital”*. Paula stated that pay differences influenced decisions regarding general practice employment.

“I think that the only downfall of general practice nursing is the fact that they aren't paid nearly as well as what the hospital nurses are. Pay rates are terrible. Hours are great. But, yeah, pay rates are terrible. I think that

that's probably one thing that will influence a lot of people as to whether they would stay there or not."

In contrast, the perceived lower time pressures of general practice were considered by some to make general practice an ideal setting for new graduate employment, particularly if they lacked confidence.

"I would say a new graduate nurse into general practice can be beneficial because it's allowing you to... be not so pressured for time."
[Paula]

"I personally do want to work in a hospital but for some people they don't like an environment that's too busy as well. So for those people I believe it would be a great option for a new graduate or somebody who's still wanting – who's still a bit too nervous to do everything in a hospital." [Olivia]

Other participants felt that the perceived 'easier' work of general practice nursing might make employment in this setting more suitable for nurses nearing the end of their career. Lorraine described, "... a lot of the GP practice nurses I have met before have been older people... at the end of their career that are looking to take it a bit easier and not be in a big setting, not be running around as much...". Faye also shared her similar views;

"Maybe towards the end of my career. I would probably think [general practice nursing] may be a little bit more easy."

5.4 Transition support is limited

While some participants expressed interest in general practice nursing as a career option, the lack of formal transition to practice programs negatively impacted seeking general practice employment immediately post-graduation.

"I think that general practice of nursing would be really beneficial for a new grad nurse. I haven't myself heard of many programs. I know a lot of the hospitals, they do the new grads, but not so much in the general practice." [Jessica]

"I would love to do it; the only thing is availability - yes, you can get a job in general practice but it's not supported like a [hospital] new graduate [program]." [Edna]

Access to professional support such as a manager, supervision and working within a team were important considerations when choosing a new graduate career path.

“I personally wouldn't want to do it as a new grad nurse. I don't feel I would have enough knowledge. It's such a wide skill set. I wouldn't have enough experience to be that person, that one on one... you're the only nurse.. you don't have anyone to ask on the spot if you needed something.” [Maggie]

“It depends on the practice. If you're at a GP that's very supportive and willing to teach then I feel like it would be a good option.” [Olivia]

Some participants who lived outside major cities expressed interest in general practice employment. However, there were perceived to be limited local employment opportunities.

“If it was offered in my area it would be – I would like it. Yeah... it would be something that I'd really look into. ... We are quite limited in the [Region] sadly. There are grad years at hospitals, and I think that's it.” [Klara]

“A lot of the medical centres I've come across in [Town], in my area, don't support a nurse.” [Celestine]

6. Discussion

Most participants did not consider general practice as a priority career path following graduation. Several participants expressed concerns about seeking general practice employment immediately post-graduation. These concerns were predominately related to limited exposure to and experience of the GPN role, perceptions around skill development and consolidation, lower remuneration and limited transition support. However, while others have described PHC as ‘not real nursing’ and a low-status job (Cooper et al., 2014; van Iersel et al., 2018), participants in this study shared much more positive perceptions of general practice nursing overall. Some participants in this study spoke of general practice as a viable option later in their career when they had consolidated skills in a hospital and were more independent in their nursing practice. They also identified that general practice offered opportunities to build skills that are not practised in the hospital.

Despite these positive views, participants were conscious about their knowledge deficit around career pathways around general practice due to limited GPN career promotion at university.

The growth of community-based healthcare requires increased student awareness and preparedness for roles beyond those in hospital settings (Cooper et al., 2014). Current BN curricula lack emphasis on such non-traditional nursing roles (Schwartz, 2019). Since nurse academics are strong role models to students (Gibbs & Kulig, 2017), increasing GPN involvement in academia may assist in demystifying nursing roles and promoting career pathways in the general practice setting (Albutt, Ali & Watson, 2013).

Limited clinical experiences (van Iersel et al., 2018), and acute care focused curricula (Calma, Halcomb & Stephens, 2019) impact career choices. Indeed, many participants voiced perceptions with limited exposure to the GPN role. International literature concurs that undergraduate programs provide inconsistent and inadequate PHC preparation (Albutt, Ali & Watson, 2013; Murray-Parahi et al., 2020; Wojnar & Whelan, 2017). Ensuring that undergraduate programs provide exposure to diverse practice areas would facilitate more informed choices about career options. The impact of such a strategy was supported by McInnes et al. (2015) who reported that positive clinical placement experiences enhanced perceptions and increased interest in general practice as a career.

Several participants commented on the importance of skills consolidation and development opportunities when choosing employment. Participants shared concerns around the potential of being limited in skill development in general practice, which mirrors perceptions of broader PHC (Wojnar & Whelan, 2017). Beyond misconceptions of the GPN role, this highlights a gap in participants' understanding of the depth and breadth of GPN skills, and the need for nurses to be able to transfer skills across clinical settings. Indeed, nursing students have been reported to be often unsuspecting of the full complexities of the RNs role, and the skills to be learnt and practised (Hawkins, Jeong & Smith, 2019). Good quality clinical experience in a diverse range of clinical settings will equip undergraduate nursing students to better understand the transferability of their skills between settings and the variety of roles that nurses play in the delivery of care.

The lower salary in general practice in comparison to nurses employed in a hospital diminished the appeal of general practice as a career option among participants in this study. Poor salaries have long caused high levels of dissatisfaction among GPNs (Curtis & Glacken, 2014; Halcomb & Bird, 2020). Investing in strategies to address issues around job satisfaction, particularly in terms of remuneration has significant potential to address these recruitment issues (Halcomb et al., 2018; Halcomb & Bird, 2020).

For those who did express an interest in general practice nursing as a new graduate career, a lack of formal transition programs was a major deterrent. Although there have been some recent new graduate programs in Australia (Aggar et al., 2017; McInnes et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2018), there remains limited availability of such programs. The small business nature and funding arrangements for Australian general practice present an ongoing challenge in the organisation and delivery of new graduate programs in this setting (McInnes et al., 2019). In the absence of formal programs, further research needs to investigate how practices can be supported to provide formal transition support.

7. Study Limitations

Participants were drawn from five institutions across metropolitan and rural areas in a single State, and recruitment was undertaken via email or institutional learning sites. Despite a national accreditation system for Australian nursing education, students in other jurisdictions may have differing views. Additionally, the promotional recruitment material may not have been seen by all students during the study period for various reasons. It is also possible that those who responded may have had more polarised views than those who did not.

8. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that working in a hospital was largely prioritised as an initial career pathway. There were varying views around the opportunities to consolidate and develop new skills, workplace conditions, and availability of transition programs in general practice. There is a need to encourage nursing students to appreciate the breadth of general practice nursing, and the realities of the complex work GPNs do. Building appreciation of the transferability of clinical skills has the potential to open new graduates to feel more confident in seeking non-traditional employment. Given the increased focus on community-based care, it is important for new graduate nurses to actively seek employment in areas of increasing demand such as general practice.

Nurse educators need to promote curricula which expose nursing students to a range of clinical settings to facilitate informed decisions about career choice. This can be achieved by ensuring that curricula include both realistic theoretical content and high-quality clinical placements in the range of areas in which nurses practice (Schwartz, 2019). Accreditation agencies also need to evaluate curricula to ensure that these align with the demands of the health service in relation to workforce needs. Strategies to enhance the profile of diverse settings, such as general practice, are important to ensure that these GPNs are valued and that the potential career pathway is highlighted. The facilitation of transition to practice programs in general practice also have the potential to attract more new graduate nurses into this setting.

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