



A Senior Nursing Student's Perception about Providing Care to Critically Ill Patients following an Externship

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Abstract

High anxiety levels are prevalent among graduate nurses transitioning from student nurses to professional nurses. Along with higher anxiety levels, low levels of self-confidence in clinical decision-making skills are also reported among new graduate nurses. Nurse externship programs provide senior-level nursing students the opportunity to increase self-confidence, decrease anxiety, and improve clinical decision-making skills by practicing in the graduate nurse role under a supervising Registered Nurse. Following a comprehensive literature search, there is limited research on nurse externships in the critical care clinical environment and the positive benefits externship programs provide nursing students. The aim of this qualitative descriptive case study is to describe one senior nursing students' perception on providing care for critically ill patients during a summer nurse externship. The student nurse journaled a week prior to the externship, each day following the experience and upon the completion of the experience. The method of journaling allowed for accurate self-reflection and acknowledgment of changes in confidence, anxiety and critical decision-making skills. Following the completion of a ten-week externship program, the nursing student reflected on personal and professional growth which included increase in self-confidence, decreased anxiety, and improved clinical decision-making in providing care for critically ill patients. Externships can provide senior-level nursing students a successful transition to professional clinical practice and promote safer practice at the bedside.

Keywords: nurse externship; critical care; self-confidence; clinical decision making; anxiety; safe practice

Introduction

Nursing school provides a variety of learning opportunities for nursing students throughout the program. One learning opportunity that is vital to the nursing students' growth is the clinical experience. Clinical experience contributes to nursing student's growth by enhancing critical thinking, clinical decision-making skills, learning prioritization of patients and implementing interventions based on assessment data. Nursing students' clinical experience can further be enhanced through internship and/or externship programs. An internship program provides nursing students' in all educational levels the opportunity to train and learn the role of a nursing assistant. In comparison, an externship is offered to senior level nursing students and provides the opportunity to work together with a Registered Nurse (RN) in an acute care setting. The senior nursing student functions in a graduate nurse role, supervised by an assigned RN, and performs the following tasks: patient assessment; patient education, clinical decision making, clinical reasoning, implement nursing interventions, provide patient care, collaborate with the interprofessional health care team, and execute physicians' orders (White, Fetter, & Ruth-Sahd, 2019).

Research indicates externship programs provide the student nurse additional training and education in their future RN role (Shipman, Hooten & Lea, 2016; Ruth-Sahd, Beck & McCall, 2010; White et al., 2019). The purpose of the externship program is for senior-level nursing students to train in an RN role prior to the completion of nursing school. The additional clinical experience and education aids to build upon nursing concepts and skills previously taught in the classroom and clinical setting, such as clinical decision making, prioritization of care, and problem-solving. In addition, the externship will also provide a smoother transition from student nurse to the professional nurse. Senior-level nursing students who participate in an externship program experience decrease anxiety with clinical decision making and also improve self-confidence (White et al., 2019). Externships also provide nursing students the chance to network within the health-care system to establish professional relationships with future employers. Nursing students who participate in an externship program experience additional experience and opportunities to explore specialties such as critical care compared to peers who do not participate in an externship program.

Nursing students may not experience the opportunity to provide care for critically ill patients while enrolled in nursing school. The lack of exposure creates fear and anxiety about this environment especially for the graduate nurse (Masango & Chiliza, 2015). Critical care environments can be extremely overwhelming and fear provoking due to the acuity of the patient population. Exposure to the critical care clinical environment through an externship program, prior to graduation, may advance and improve student nurses analytical thinking, clinical reasoning, self-confidence and clinical decision-making skills. The purpose of this paper is to describe one senior-level nursing students' perception on providing care for critically ill patients in an acute-care setting following participation in an externship program.

Externship Experience

An externship is defined as an educational and clinical work experience for nursing students who have successfully completed the junior year of nursing school. An externship is offered to senior-level nursing students and provides the opportunity to function in a graduate nurse role with RN supervision. The skills that a senior nursing student who participates in an externship program performs includes patient care, patient education, implementing the nursing process and appropriate nursing interventions, complete a thorough physical assessment, report changes in patient status to the supervising RN, execute orders and collaborate with the interprofessional team (White et al., 2019). Qualifications for this program include satisfactory completion of junior-level nursing courses with no specified GPA requirements. Nurse externship programs provide senior-level nursing students with the opportunity to gain valuable clinical experience while aiding in the transition to professional nurse.

Literature Review

Externship programs provide valuable clinical experience for senior level nursing students. A review of available literature relating to nursing externship programs and nursing student attitudes was conducted. CINAHL and EBSCO databases were searched. Three studies were chosen to review which reflect growth in self-confidence and a decrease in anxiety among nurse externs in three different externship programs. The following literature review supports externship programs and the professional growth they provide to senior level nursing students.

Nurse externship programs provide the opportunity for senior-level student nurses to enhance confidence in nursing skills and in clinical decision making while reducing anxiety. Shipman, Hooten, and Lea (2016), conducted a hermeneutic phenomenological study to describe the lived experience of senior nursing students who participated in the Veterans Affairs Learning Opportunity Residency (VALOR) pre-licensure externship program. The study also evaluated how the residency program experience affected the senior nursing students nursing practice. The findings from this study found externship programs promote self-confidence, improve clinical decision-making and ease when interacted with the interprofessional team. Therefore, nursing students who complete externships have the opportunity to have experience with collaboration and clinical decision making compared to their peers who do not complete a nurse externship.

Strong and effective clinical decision making is vital for nurses but several psychological barriers such as low self-confidence and high anxiety with decision making can lead to poor patient outcomes. White et al. (2019) conducted a prospective quasi-experimental factorial 3-group before-and-after design to analyze the effect of summer employment on 134 nursing student's confidence and anxiety levels with clinical decision making (CDM) during an 8-week externship program. White et al. (2019), found significant differences in self-confidence and anxiety between the nurse extern (NE) group and non-NE group. Nurse externships aid in developing nursing student's clinical decision-making skills and reducing anxiety associated with the clinical decision-making process. Confidence in clinical decision making is vital for assuming the role as the professional RN postgraduation.

Due to the comprehensive nature of Ruth-Sahd et al. (2010)'s study, an overview of the study follows. Both White et al. (2019) and Ruth-Sahd et al. (2010) examined the impact nurse externship programs have on nursing students' self-confidence. Similarly, to White et al. (2019), Ruth-Sahd et al. (2010) found an increase in self-confidence among senior-level nurse externs after the completion of an externship program. The findings of the study conducted by Ruth-Sahd et al. (2010) resulted in three themes which emerged portraying the transformative learning process experienced by nurse externs' assumptions, beliefs and values concerning the profession of nursing. The three themes which emerged were: affirming assumptions, banishing core beliefs and validating values.

The research findings from this descriptive qualitative study showed externship programs were beneficial in promoting nurse externs' self-confidence as a profession nurse. The externship program validated nurse externs' views of exceptional communication techniques and the importance of quality patient care. Nurse externs were able to gain valuable clinical experience while transforming or affirming their beliefs and values of the nursing profession. Overall, externship programs have shown to improve confidence and continue to enhance experience in organizing care organizing care and collaborating with the interdisciplinary team. In the section that follows, a description of the present case study beginning with the setting of the study, the nature of the data collection process, the steps of qualitative data analysis and the salient findings will be discussed.

One Senior Level Nursing Student's Experience Prior to the Externship

Journaling has been an effective medium for nurses to explore their personal journey and experiences. The process of journaling aids the student nurse to relate personal thoughts, feelings and beliefs about an individual experience. The nurse externship occurred at a tertiary Northeastern hospital located in a rural area. This externship program was a paid, full-time position lasting 10 weeks between June and August working three 12-hour shifts per week. My experience was on a 30-bed Intensive Care Unit (ICU) where the patient population mostly consisted of cardiac patients who required post percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI), coronary artery bypass graft (CABG) surgery, liver and kidney transplantation, thoracic surgery, vascular surgery and patients who needed extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) most of which were on ventilators. The overall intent of this externship was for the same RN to supervise the student nurse throughout the 10-week externship program, however due to extenuating circumstances, that was not feasible. During the beginning of the externship, I was consistently under direct supervision of the RN. However, as I gained experience providing care for intensive care patients, demonstrated safe and competent patient care, and built effective communication with the supervising RN, I became responsible for certain tasks such as endotracheal suctioning, patient assessment and tracheostomy care without direct supervision. Throughout the experience, my goals were to improve organization and prioritization of patient

care, enhance clinical decision making, analytical thinking, clinical reasoning, progress with physical assessment skills, as well as increase self-confidence and lower anxiety when providing care to critically ill patients.

Prior to the externship, I reflected upon initial emotions which revealed mixed feelings. A variety of emotions emulated from not fully comprehending personal expectations for the experience. I began to feel nervous two weeks prior to the start of the experience stemming from the lack of experience and exposure to the critical care setting. The lack of knowledge was inclusive with providing care for critically ill patients with ventilators, arterial lines and Swan Ganz catheters and the new role in managing patients with complex disease processes. I was aware the Intensive Care Unit was multifaceted compared to a Medical/Surgical unit with various equipment and monitors which only heightened my anxiety centering upon interpretation of data and comparison to normal values adding to the complexity of this experience. Additionally, I had never practiced in the ICU and this factor alone created anticipatory anxiety to start over on a new unit with new staff.

I had prior experience as a nursing assistant and was employed by a small-community acute care setting in the Emergency Department for three years. The externship program on the ICU was an experience which forced me to journey out of a familiar comfort zone. I also felt a small amount of pressure leading into this experience because the Intensive Care unit, where the externship occurred, has a reputation of hiring peers nursing students from the baccalaureate nursing program I currently attend. I felt pressured to satisfy personal expectations, such as demonstrate intellectual questions and answers plus competence in providing care for critically ill patient. These personal expectations were important to me as I have a strong desire to work on this unit following graduation. Along with feeling nervous, I was also extremely excited for the experience as this unit combined specialties of cardiology and critical care. I was intrigued by this particular unit because of the fast-paced, fast-thinking environment coupled with the opportunity to perform a wide variety of nursing skills. The patient-nurse ratio was enticing as it would afford me to provide holistic care for each client with a maximum nurse to patient ratio of 2:1. The realm of excitement ensued the opportunity to learn a variety of skills such as reading electrocardiogram (EKG) strips, managing patients on ventilators, and learning how to provide care for ECMO and post CABG patients. I felt that this opportunity would help improve personal critical thinking and organization skills as corresponding literature reflects this level of care requires critical clinical decision-making skills and exceptional organization skills. My personal desire to learn while displaying dedication and drive to the staff and manager drove the individual experience due to the desire to work on this unit following graduation.

Halfway Through the Externship (5 weeks)

Approximately five weeks into the externship, I began to notice personal growth in organizing and prioritizing care and clinical decision-making skills. This realization of personal growth emerged during a debriefing with my preceptor following the admission of a post-

operative CABG patient. At this point in the externship, I provided care for a postoperative CABG patient six times. Following a CABG procedure, the patient is transported to the Intensive Care unit on a ventilator, with a Foley catheter, an arterial line, a Swan Ganz catheter, chest tubes, and numerous drips including a vasopressor, sedative and prophylactic antibiotics. During this point of the externship, I felt more relaxed and experienced less anxiety compared to the start of the program as providing repetitious care promoted self-confidence. Additionally, I was able to anticipate the necessary post-operative care for a CABG patient which included a ventilator to provide an airway, arterial line to measure pressures, foley catheter for strict intake and output, and a Swan Ganz catheter to measure central venous pressure. My personal transformation in learning reflects an important personal accomplishment when compared to the beginning of this experience due to increased knowledge on a CABG procedure, postoperative standard of care, and treatment modalities.

I learned clinical pathways for patients who required a CABG procedure. The critical pathway guides patient care after CABG procedure and include sedatives, blood pressure support (such as Levophed), and a prophylactic antibiotic drip. A clinical pathway is the standard of care for a specific population of patients and assures quality healthcare. Midway through the externship, I was aware of the importance of clinical pathways to appropriately address client needs following a CABG. Additionally, the supervising RN taught me how to read EKG strips and differentiate between normal sinus rhythm, atrial fibrillation/flutter, ventricular tachycardia, and ventricular fibrillation.

During this experience, I also learned ventilator settings, modes of ventilation, volumes measured by the ventilator such as tidal volume, and values to document hourly including respiratory rate and tidal volume. In addition, I learned normal arterial line values, mean arterial pressures (MAP), and right atrium (RA) pressure lines, along with interventions to implement for abnormal values with these devices. Additional learning revealed a MAP, RA pressure, and arterial line reading could be low due to a variety of reasons such as dehydration or hemorrhage. As a result of having a repetitious assignment in providing care for post-operative CABG patients with low pressure readings, I was able to correlate normal pressure values and interventions to implement when attempting to correct the abnormal pressure values. This experience was valuable in advancing the students' clinical knowledge, enhanced critical thinking and clinical decision making in providing care for post-operative CABG patients.

The transition of theoretical knowledge to practice was a pivotal turning point in my personal experience. The ability to learn normal values of complete blood count (CBC), arterial blood gas (ABG), basic metabolic panel (BMP), RA pressure, cardiac index (CI), cardiac output (CO), and stroke volume (SVO₂), recognize abnormal values, and knowing the appropriate interventions to implement was key to the my learning process. This crucial step in my experience added clarity to prior confusion on applicability of nurses' knowledge and skills to individualized patient care.

I realized, five weeks into the experience, focusing on clinical pathways, tasks and care are equally important for providing care for critically ill patients. For example, the critical care nurse provides endotracheal suctioning and hygiene as needed while adhering to laboratory

protocols such as drawing a BMP every six hours. Participating in the ICU externship assisted me to build knowledge and confidence in a complex clinical setting. I feel individual skills in organizing and prioritizing patient care has drastically improved since the start of the externship. I was able to provide care confidentially and competently for two critically ill patients with RN supervision. Therefore, the experience decrease anxiety and increase self-confidence and competence upon the conclusion of the 5th week of the externship. However, I identified areas that required improvement such as interpreting EKGs, increasing knowledge with ventilators, arterial lines, and Swan Ganz catheters, and seeking opportunities to learn about other patient diagnoses in the intensive care unit.

End of the Experience

Upon the conclusion of the experience, I felt an enormous amount of personal growth, enhanced self-confidence and lower levels of anxiety in providing care for critically ill patients especially post-operative CABG patients. The nursing externship has provided me the opportunity to develop self-confidence and competence in knowing and implementing the correct standard of care for patients in the Intensive Care Unit. I was able to anticipate the patients' required care and work saliently beside RN's to gain insight and knowledge. My enhancement of knowledge in skills, procedures, and care of critically ill clientele provided me with a boost of confidence. As a result of this externship, I feel prepared to assume the RN role in the Intensive Care Unit.

Conclusion

The externship program has been a valuable experience for the senior nursing student. As a result of this experience, the student developed a profound comfort level in the critical care environment and providing care for critically ill patients. The students' critical thinking, clinical decision making and organization skills in providing care for more than one critically ill patient improved. Furthermore, the student demonstrated increased knowledge in educating patients and their families on what to expect in the critical care environment. My personal reflection of the externship experience can assist me with improving critical thinking, clinical decision making, organization and collaborating with the interprofessional team during the next sequential clinical course which is advanced medical-surgical nursing.

Overall, an externship can provide nursing students with an insightful experience. There are many advantages for participating in an externship program including increasing self-confidence and reducing anxiety with clinical decision making, opportunities to collaborate with the interprofessional team, and aiding in the transition from student nurse to professional nurse. The experience allows for reflection on various roles of the critical care nurse and the application of skills in advanced medical surgical nursing. Employment avenues can be a positive advantage of this experience by providing nurse externs with job opportunities following graduation. Cultivating skills and knowledge aids in increased confidence and lowers anxiety levels over the course of a 10-week program. Externships provide personal and professional growth and a keen opportunity for hands-on clinical experiences.

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