The APN-PLACE Telehealth Education Network: Legal and Regulatory Considerations

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Telehealth technology can enhance nursing clinical education by allowing for virtual site visits, preceptor support, preceptor education, and student oversight. The Advance Practice Nurse-Preceptor Link and Clinical Education (APN-PLACE) Telehealth Education Network is a new and innovative video communication system that connects schools of nursing to preceptors and clinical practice sites. Specific areas of focus include preceptor education and support, student assessment, and clinical experiences when implementing a telehealth education network. As with in-person, or traditional, clinical education, it is important to consider the legal and regulatory issues related to the use of telehealth programs in clinical education. This article presents a telehealth preceptor support network and provides an overview of the associated legal and regulatory issues surrounding its use in advanced practice registered nurse clinical education.

Keywords: Advanced Practice Registered Nurses, APRN, APRN education, clinical education, preceptor education, telehealth technology, virtual classroom

Given the availability of technology for educational purposes, nurses are on the cusp of a new era in nursing clinical education. Indeed, it is possible to address barriers to nursing faculty and preceptor shortages by enhancing student clinical education using telehealth technologies. A telehealth educational network is a robust video communication system connecting schools of nursing to clinical practice sites and preceptors. For the purposes of this article, a preceptor is defined as an advanced practice registered nurse (APRN) who assists in the clinical education of the APRN student in the clinical arena. Although APRNs can be precepted by physicians, this article will focus on APRN preceptors (i.e., nurse practitioners, nurse midwives, and clinical nurse specialists). As with clinical service, telehealth eliminates geographic boundaries in education and offers new opportunities to use technology in the clinical education of advanced practice nursing students.

Background

The overwhelming burden of caring for a patient population that is increasingly chronically ill and aging comes at a time when the United States is experiencing severe primary health care workforce shortages. These issues are compounded in rural regions, where shortages of health care professionals and long distances to access care create additional barriers and health care disparities (Douthit, Kiv, Dwolatzky, & Biswas, 2015). The demand for primary care physicians will far exceed the supply; therefore, APRNs should be positioned to fill this gap (Health Resources and Services Administration [HRSA], 2013). However, schools of nursing face many challenges in meeting the increased demand for APRN graduates who are ready for practice. According to an American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) report (2017), in 2016, schools of nursing turned away over 60,000 qualified applicants to undergraduate and graduate nursing programs as a result of faculty, clinical site, and clinical preceptor shortages. New models of APRN clinical education should be explored to address such barriers to increasing rates of practice-ready new graduates.

Complex issues in clinical nursing education can only be addressed with a multifaceted approach. Evolving paradigms of clinical education including academic-practice partnerships, integrative models, new models of clinical preceptorships, and the use of simulation are being developed and evaluated. To address the bottleneck in nursing clinical education, targeted initiatives have been developed with some success, such as those offering fellowships and loan forgiveness and programs designed to improve schools of nursing admissions capacity (AACN, n.d.; Beal, 2012). Additionally, exploring new models of clinical preceptorship, including the Integrated Clinical Preceptorship and the Team Modified Clinical Teaching Associate Model, have been introduced (Nordgren, Richardson, & Laurella, 1998; Brathwaite & Lemonde, 2011). Although these components are important for
addressing nursing shortages, it is time to consider new designs in the current APRN clinical education model that use technology to address both faculty and preceptor shortages and support all nursing programs and students exponentially as part of a multifaceted approach.

An innovative strategy to address faculty and preceptor shortages is a telehealth education network to enhance the current one-on-one preceptorship model. Video technology can be used as a tool to assist in communication, teaching, oversight, and mentoring of preceptors and students in clinical practice sites. Telehealth uses telecommunications technology, digital devices, and information to provide patient consultation and care, remote monitoring, and education (Rutledge et al., 2017). Telehealth is growing rapidly, as evident by the 200 items of state legislation presented in 44 states during 2017 to expand or modify telehealth services (Center for Connected Health Policy, 2017). Telehealth will be pervasive throughout all facets of care in the near future because of its usefulness to health care as a universal strategy to address the dramatic challenges in the cultural landscape of our nation’s health care system. For nursing to respond, it must be able to produce well-educated, expert APRNs in adequate numbers to meet demands, especially in rural communities. The longstanding one-on-one apprentice model of nursing clinical education relies on practitioners volunteering their time and independently developing expertise to precept students. With today’s complexity of care, time requirements, and competitive demands, this model has resulted in widespread preceptor shortages and is not sustainable. The one-to-one preceptorship model should be rethought and redesigned for the 21st-century technological age.

The purpose of this article is to present an overview of a new and innovative telehealth education network, Advanced Practice Nurse-Preceptor Link and Clinician Education (APN-PLACE), along with the legal and regulatory issues related to its use in APRN clinical education.

Overview: APN-PLACE Telehealth Education Network

The APN-PLACE network was developed to address faculty and clinical preceptor shortages. It provides education and support to preceptors, assesses student performance in clinical settings, provides students with an opportunity to use telehealth for patient encounters, and exposes students to telehealth technology (Figure 1). Faculty at schools of nursing use live Web videoconferencing and medical peripherals—which are pieces of diagnostic equipment such as a digital stethoscope—to connect more frequently with students in practicum sites without the burden of travel, increasing the efficiency of each faculty member. The network also allows for preceptor support and education, which can increase the number of preceptors and improve their skills. These changes shift the model from one in which faculty communicate, teach, and mentor students and preceptors only through in-person contact to one where faculty can connect, observe, and educate students and preceptors frequently, easily, and spontaneously using live videoconferencing.

APN-PLACE is a HRSA-funded preceptor education program that links rural and underserved clinical practice sites with schools of nursing using telehealth. APN-PLACE is a collaboration between the University of Virginia Center for Telehealth and Old Dominion University School of Nursing. Other academic schools of nursing are invited to join as determined by their alignment with goals of the program, which are to establish a telehealth education network to provide preceptor training with synchronous faculty and peer support to increase, diversify, and place APRN students in rural and underserved clinical sites with expert APRN preceptors. By employing secure, advanced telehealth technologies, APN-PLACE can deliver innovative training and communications via virtual classrooms. A variety of telehealth platforms are used at schools of nursing and clinical sites for the virtual site visits and virtual classroom including: a conference room with videoconferencing equipment, a mobile cart with peripherals such as stethoscopes and otoscopes, a dedicated telehealth examination room, a mobile box, or simply a handheld mobile device.

Preceptor Education and Support

Advanced communications technologies enable preceptors to be educated and supported by faculty via the telehealth network through the virtual classroom. Preceptors are the link that enables