



Factors associated with final year nursing students' desire to work in the primary health care setting: Findings from a national cross-sectional survey



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ABSTRACT

Background: Registered nurses are under-represented in the primary health care setting both internationally and in Australia, and this shortage is predicted to worsen. To address the increasingly complex healthcare needs of an ageing population, it is vital to develop and sustain a primary health care nursing workforce, yet attracting nurses is challenging. In Australia, registered nurses graduating from university typically commence their careers in hospital-based transition to professional practice programs. Similar programs in primary health care settings may be a valuable strategy for developing the primary health care nursing workforce, yet little is known about nursing students desire to work in this setting, factors that influence this, or their expectations of primary health care-focused transition to professional practice programs.

Objectives: This study sought to identify factors associated with final year nursing students' desire to work in primary health care setting including demographic factors, expectations of future employment conditions, and job content. It also explored expectations of graduate transition programs based in primary health care.

Design: A cross-sectional survey design comprising a quantitative online survey.

Setting: 14 Australian universities from all states/territories, both rural and urban.

Participants: 530 final-year nursing students.

Methods: Binary logistic regression identifying factors contributing to desire to work in primary health care.

Results: The desire of nursing students to work in primary health care is associated with older age, greater perceived value of employment conditions including flexibility, and less perceived importance of workplace support.

Conclusions: Collaborative efforts from primary health care nurses, health professionals, academics and policy makers are needed to attract new graduate nurses to primary health care.

1. Introduction and Background

Workforce planning is fundamental for ensuring a sustainable nursing workforce. This requires the alignment of nursing supply with the requisite demands of the healthcare system (HWA, 2014). Congruent to the current worldwide situation, Australia is now facing a crucial shortage of nurses (Health Workforce Australia; HWA, 2012). It is anticipated that by 2025 nursing demand in Australia will exceed supply, with an estimated predicted deficit of 85,000–110,000 nurses (HWA, 2012, 2014). Contributing factors include: the imminent retirement of older nurses, increasing levels of discontent and job dissatisfaction among nurses, and challenges associated with both retaining nurses and attracting new people to the profession (Shacklock and Brunetto, 2012).

The rapidly changing nature of healthcare also requires

consideration in view of nursing workforce planning. Like many other Western countries, Australia has an ageing population with an increased prevalence of people with multi-morbidity and comorbidities. This will necessitate a shifting of health service provisions from the acute sector into Primary Health Care (PHC) to manage these patients in the community. Registered nurses play a central role in PHC and are integral to cost-effective, high quality management and integration of care for people with chronic and complex health conditions (Parkinson and Parker, 2013; Henderson et al., 2014). At present, considerable nursing shortages exist in PHC settings in Australia and this is predicted to worsen (HWA, 2012). The lack of clear career pathways, few professional development opportunities, and inconsistent role definition and employment conditions is impacted further by the government funding approach of PHC in Australia, predominately operating on a

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fee-for-service model (Duckett, 2015). Collectively these factors present challenges attracting and retaining nurses in primary health care settings (Gordon et al., 2014). Strategies are now needed to address this situation. A proposed initiative is the implementation of PHC Transition to Professional Practice Programs (TPPP) to enable newly qualified nurses to commence their careers in primary health care settings on graduation (Bloomfield et al., 2015). This would support the development of a sustainable PHC nursing workforce by enabling nurses to work in PHC at an earlier stage.

In Australia, TPPPs, previously referred to as “New Graduate Programs” have become a conventional entry point into the nursing workforce for newly registered nurses at the completion of their nursing degree. Designed to support and facilitate the development of clinical competency, confidence, critical thinking, and professional socialization into the nursing and healthcare profession (Scott et al., 2008), TPPPs are typically 6–12 months in duration. The programs usually include support for the graduate nurse in the form of preceptorship or mentorship, orientation to the work environment and educational opportunities such as study days or short courses (Rush et al., 2013). Interestingly, despite a lack of strong evidence to support the efficacy or cost-effectiveness of these programs (Levett-Jones and Fitzgerald, 2005), proponents continue to endorse TPPPs for their effect on lowering turn-over rates (Beecroft et al., 2008; Trepanier et al., 2012), increasing job satisfaction (Giallonardo et al., 2010) and supporting nurse workforce retention (Rush et al., 2013). In Australia, the vast majority of graduate nurses undertake TPPPs in the acute hospital setting, and from both a national and international perspective, there is a distinct lack of evidence about similar programs in PHC settings (Murray-Parahi et al., 2016).

To determine the contribution of new graduate programs to building a sustainable PHC nursing workforce, it is important that the development and implementation of PHC-focused TPPPs are evidence-based and structured to meet the needs of participants. The paucity of evidence in this area now needs to be addressed, particularly in light of Australia's healthcare reforms and ongoing changing healthcare needs and PHC nursing shortage.

1.1. Study Aims

This study aimed to identify factors associated with final year nursing students' intention to work in primary health care including demographic factors, expectations of employment conditions and job content, and expectations of PHC-specific graduate transition programs.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

A cross-sectional survey of nursing students in their final year of study at 14 Australian Universities was undertaken. Anonymous, quantitative data were collected from the online survey using SurveyMonkey®.

2.2. Setting and Participants

Universities from across Australia were purposely chosen to take part in the study to ensure representation of nursing students from each state and territory and urban/rural mix.

All final-year nursing students were eligible to participate in the study and included students from a range of programs including the Bachelor of Nursing, graduate-entry pre-registration programs, and double/combined degrees.

2.3. Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Sydney Human

Table 1
Items included in questionnaire.

Workplace Considerations
<i>How important are the following factors when considering where you would most like to work after graduation?</i>
<i>1 'not at all important'–5 'extremely important'</i>
Flexibility in work arrangements (e.g. full-time, part-time)
Salary
A workplace Orientation Program
A workplace Transition Program
Supervision
Mentoring
Ongoing Professional Development
Skill development
Understanding PHC
<i>The following 5 questions relate to your understanding of primary health care.</i>
<i>1 'strongly disagree'–5 'strongly agree'</i>
I understand health promotion
I am competent in health promotion
I understand the health care needs of the community
I am competent in providing education to the community
I am able to promote self-management strategies for people with chronic disease
Program Expectations
<i>In a primary care-based new graduate program I would expect:</i>
<i>1 'strongly disagree'–5 'strongly agree'</i>
The preceptor to support me
The preceptor to facilitate my learning
The preceptor to provide guidance about my career
The preceptor to be available when I need Them
The preceptor to work with me in challenging situations
To play a role in the health care team
To understand how I contribute to patient care
To be respected and acknowledged for my work
To get to know patients as individuals
See patient relationships as an important source of satisfaction
To understand my role as a registered nurse
To understand my responsibilities as a registered nurse
To understand my scope of practice as a registered nurse
Job Content Expectations^a
<i>As a registered nurse undertaking a primary care graduate program I would expect to:</i>
<i>1 'strongly disagree'–5 'strongly agree'</i>
Be provided with relevant learning opportunities
Learn new things
Perform repetitive work (reverse-scored)
Be creative
Have variety in my role
Develop my own abilities
Make decisions on my own
Have little freedom to decide how I work (reverse-scored)
Additional items
How familiar are you with the role of the registered nurse in primary health care?
<i>1 'very unfamiliar'–5 'extremely familiar'</i>
How important do you feel about learning the role of the registered nurse in primary health care during your nursing degree?
<i>1 'not at all important'–5 'extremely important'</i>
Are you considering a nursing career in primary health care? [Yes/No]

^a Adapted from Karasek et al. (1998).

Research Ethics Committee (Project no. 2014/417). Participant consent was implied by completion and submission of the electronic survey. Participatory incentivization was included to aid recruitment. All participants were entered into a draw to win a tablet device, awarded randomly to one participant and managed by support staff independent of the research team.

2.4. Data Collection

There were a lack of survey instruments measuring PHC workforce conditions, and graduate program expectations appropriate to student populations. As such, we developed sub-themed questionnaires

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