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# Experiences of Turkish undergraduate nursing students in the intensive care unit

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## KEYWORDS

Nursing students;  
Clinical practicum;  
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## Summary

**Background:** Clinical practicum provides many opportunities for nursing students to learn more about their subject and develop essential nursing skills. In contrast, nursing students often have difficulties during their clinical practicum.

**Aim:** This study aims to describe the clinical experiences of undergraduate nursing students in the intensive care unit.

**Methods:** A descriptive qualitative approach was used in this study. The study was performed at a military medical academy between 1 March and 30 April 2008. The study was conducted with 15 fourth-year baccalaureate nursing students. Data were obtained through open-ended and in-depth audio-taped interviews, which lasted approximately 35–45 min.

**Findings:** Themes emerged from the participants' descriptions of their experiences in the intensive care unit: anxiety, fear of doing harm, emotional connection and empathy, improving self-confidence, perceived responsibility for patients, prioritizing care of patients, preserving dignity, coping with confronting situations, and communication in the intensive care unit.

**Conclusion:** The views and expectations of nursing students regarding intensive care practice are important for the organization of the nursing education environment. The nursing curriculum must be revised and developed according to the needs of students.

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## Introduction

Clinical education is an essential part of professional nursing education (Elcigil & Sari, 2007). Clinical education enables the integration of theoretical information in patient care by nursing students. Clinical practice areas are the places where basic nursing skills that allow the application of theoretical knowledge develop. It provides many opportunities for nursing students to learn more about their subject and to develop essential nursing skills (Nolan, 1998). One of the important competencies within

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nursing education is clinical competency, which includes clinical skills like communication, the taking of medical history, physical examination, information, and clinical reasoning. Organized information in clinical reasoning is important (Van Der Vleuten & Schuwirth, 2005). Clinical practicum in intensive care develops clinical reasoning by organizing information; however, students may have different experiences during their clinical practicum. The factors affecting the clinical education of nursing students are the clinical learning environment, clinical educator competence, the technical ability of the nursing staff that is supervising students, interdisciplinary communication, collaboration between clinical nurse educators and clinical practice facilitators and student anxiety regarding clinical practicum (Bayar, Cadir, & Bayar, 2009; Elcigil & Sari, 2011; Henderson, Cooke, Creedy, & Walker, 2012).

The intensive care unit (ICU) is one of the places where nursing students receive education on the full scope of clinical applications. Clinical practicum in an ICU is valuable for nursing students, as intensive care patients require more complex or acute nursing care. This allows students to apply a wide array of skills and can observe interdisciplinary teamwork and decision making (Swinny & Brady, 2010).

## Background

The transition from student to registered nurse was first regarded by some as a reality shock, and that characterization is still valid today. Studies have reported that this transition period is highly stressful for students and newly graduated nurses. This is a major cause of stress amongst newly graduated registered nurses and includes the uncertainty and chaos of clinical nursing practice, increasing responsibilities, clinical skills deficits, ineffective support systems, anxiety about time management, socialization, and communication with the dying and with grieving relatives (Delenay, 2003; O'Kane, 2012; O'Shea & Kelly, 2007; Wangensteen, Johansson, & Nordström, 2008).

Both undergraduate nursing students and newly graduated nurses can feel overwhelmed during their clinical practicum. Shin (2000) observed that students can experience shock when they realize that life is complex and dynamic and when they face the reality of death in clinical situations, following the otherwise theoretical approach in their tertiary education. The causes of stress among students during their clinical practicum include fear of unknown situations, making mistakes, using technical equipment, lack of experience, and concern about poor grades (Pulido-Martos, Augusto-Landa, & Lopez-Zafra, 2012). Transition from a student nurse into a clinical nurse is very stressful for some newly graduated nurses and many feel that they are insufficiently prepared for their new role (Ross & Clifford, 2002). In the same study, newly graduated nurses suggested that less importance should be placed on in-class repetition in the final year of the nursing curriculum. In addition, they indicated the need for more well-structured clinical application areas and a more coordinated approach to preceptorship (Ross & Clifford, 2002).

Intensive care is an area that presents many learning opportunities for nursing students. Ganz and Kahana (2006) have reported that students found the ICU to be the most interesting clinical field. Nursing students may, however,

face some difficulties in providing care for their ICU patients. Reasons for this may include the ICU environment, the advanced technological equipment used, and the characteristics of the critically ill patients themselves (Beeby, 2000). Students who are involved in rotations in the pediatric intensive care (PICU) state that they are happy with this program, they obtain new clinical skills, their theoretical knowledge increases, they learn a lot of things about dependent patient care, and they no longer feel afraid of the ICU (Abbott, 2011).

Intensive care nurses have a responsibility to provide optimal, quality health care to intensive care patients as well as to support new nurses and students. In the study by O'Kane (2012), it was shown that new nurses coped well with the pressure of the ICU when provided appropriate support, even despite problems arising in this beginning period. Khouri (2011) showed that views about professionalism were changed in a positive manner in students who were educated on intensive care compared with students who were not in her study.

The school and the administrators of the hospitals have an important role in providing nursing students sufficient clinical experience before graduation. Students must be well-prepared before their clinical practicum and must be supported during this time. It is, therefore, necessary to define how nursing students will get to practice their theoretical knowledge, what problems they may experience, and how they will feel more comfortable in the ICU from a personal perspective (Beeby, 2000).

In the studies about intensive care unit experiences of newly graduated nurses and nurses who worked in ICU for the first time, nurses emphasized the importance of clinical practicum in the ICU in the pre-graduate period. Because ICUs are specialized clinical areas, they are not one of the compulsory areas that must exist in rotation in clinical practicum of nursing students. For this reason, there are a limited number of studies in the literature about experiences of students in ICUs. Some of these studies are quantitative studies that were more focused on determining the adequacy of theoretical knowledge and skills of students than the experiences of students (Abbott, 2011; Ganz & Kahana, 2006; Khouri, 2011). In the institution where the study was conducted, all senior nursing students were practicing in the ICU by rotation. The study was planned to determine the contribution of clinical practicum in ICU to nursing education and how this education can be executed more effectively. We believe that defining the ICU experiences of nursing students will help clinical nurse educators and hospital managers increase the efficacy of clinical practicum and patient safety. The aim of the present study is to express the clinical experiences of nursing students in the intensive care unit. This study will shed light on defining the ICU clinical practicum experiences of nurses from their own point of view and will specify the subjects required to increase the efficacy of student education in the ICU.

## Methods

### Design

In this study, a descriptive qualitative design was used. In order to understand the life experiences of individuals,

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