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Feature Article

Developing a dedicated education unit in long-term care: A pilot project



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ABSTRACT

Within long-term care, the transitional care setting provides post-acute and short-stay rehabilitation to older adults, easing the transition between the acute care hospital and home or long-term care. The current nursing shortage makes it difficult for these facilities to attract and retain qualified nursing staff. In order to meet the rehabilitation needs for this patient population while at the same time addressing the challenge in nursing education of limited clinical placements and severe nurse faculty shortages, an academic-practice partnership was developed to establish a Dedicated Education Unit (DEU). The DEU is an innovative clinical education model in which experienced staff nurses serve as clinical teachers to nursing students. This paper describes the process of developing a DEU using the Partners in Caring Model as the framework. Formative and summative evaluation results and recommendations for program improvement of this pilot project are discussed.

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Nursing programs are routinely turning away qualified students because of the challenges in two key areas: recruiting and retaining qualified faculty, and securing the needed number of quality clinical placements. AACN¹ reports that U.S. nursing schools turned away 75,587 qualified applicants from baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs in 2011 for these reasons. In order to adapt to these challenges, nursing programs must reexamine their methods of clinical preparation for students and consider innovative methods of clinical teaching that incorporate nontraditional clinical settings.

The gerontological specialty care needs for an aging population require additional emphasis at all academic nursing program levels. Institutional long-term care (LTC) is a health care setting that will grow in need and importance. As an educational clinical site, LTC has seen limited incorporation in the educational preparation of

many baccalaureate nurses, and when utilized, it is most often focused on achieving fundamental course objectives related to basic nursing communication and skills competencies, while in reality, this setting offers a much broader clinical learning experience for students. In fact, "LTC provides abundant opportunities for transformative learning and practice in areas that are core to 21st century nursing: managing chronic illness and palliative care in ways that are patient-centered and evidence-based, working in interdisciplinary teams, supervising unlicensed caregivers, and developing systems for ongoing quality improvement."^{2(p243)}

Within LTC, transitional care is a setting which provides post-acute and short-stay rehabilitation. Transitional care is growing in importance in health care to provide further sub-acute care as adults and older adults transition from acute hospital settings to home or to long-stay institutional care. In order to prepare nursing students to deliver quality care that encompasses the highly specialized needs of this population, developing innovative clinical training using a dedicated educational unit model can address the ongoing challenge of limited nursing faculty and clinical sites as

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well as the future preparation of highly skilled nurses in the care of adults and older adults in transitional care settings. This paper describes the process of developing a dedicated education unit using the Partners in Caring Model³ as the framework. Formative and summative evaluation results and recommendations for program improvement of this pilot project are discussed.

Background and significance

In 2009, the Massachusetts Senior Care Foundation, representing 400 institutional and assisted living facilities in the state, joined forces with the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education's Nursing and Allied Health Initiative, to co-sponsor a statewide conference on Transforming LTC as a Clinical Education Site. Practice, academic and regulatory leaders were invited to brainstorm on what the most compelling issues were and what solutions could be proposed. Among the recommendations included was the establishment of DEU's in LTC. Participants agreed that doing so could demonstrate that long-term care is a meaningful clinical site for nursing students, enhance the gerontological nursing competency of students, and promote LTC as an attractive employment site upon graduation. Subsequently, in 2011 the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education posted a call for proposals for Nursing Education Redesign grants. In response to that call, a public university, in partnership with long-standing practice partner, a long-term transitional care facility, met to develop a proposal that would institute a DEU in the 33-bed, newly established Center for Advanced Therapy transitional care unit. Institutional Review Board approval was sought and granted so that publication of the feasibility study could be submitted. With funding received to offer stipends to clinical teachers and resources to support the education of the clinical teachers in their roles, the DEU partners began meeting monthly from August 2011 to October 2012 to plan, develop, implement, and evaluate the pilot DEU.

Review of the literature

The Dedicated Education Unit (DEU), sometimes referred to as the Clinical Education Unit, is one example of an innovative clinical education model that provides meaningful clinical experiences for students and promotes the development of nurse faculty, while delivering high quality care to patients. In the model, the clinical agency staff is directly involved in the education of nursing students with University faculty serving as the liaison and faculty oversight to the clinician teachers.⁴ The National Council of State Boards of Nursing suggests that the "DEU is an excellent way to work with the faculty shortage."^{5(p3)}

The DEU clinical teaching model, developed in Flinders, Australia, is proposed as a method to increase faculty and student capacity by utilizing well-prepared RN clinicians as educators for nursing students, with academic faculty serving as role models and mentors to these scholar clinicians.⁶ In doing so, additional students can be accommodated on clinical sites than would be traditionally allowed by either state regulatory Boards of Nursing and/or as delineated in agency contracts for the typical faculty-supervised group clinical placements of pre-licensure students. Furthermore, Benner et al⁷ suggest that clinical education using the typical mandated ratios of one faculty member to 8–10 students may be less effective than needed to prepare nurses for practice, and that graduates need to be prepared in the multitude of health care settings in which they will practice and not merely acute-care hospital settings.⁷ The DEU was first replicated in Oregon in 2003 at Providence Portland Medical Center and Providence St. Vincent Medical Center, and in 2004 at the Portland Veterans Administration Medical Center.⁸

The DEU clinical teaching model is based on the assumption that the clinical education is developed collaboratively by the academic-practice partners and that it provides an optimal learning environment for both students and staff who serve as clinical nursing instructors/teachers. On such a unit, nurses are recruited and selected by administration and they choose to work on a DEU because they enjoy the teaching role.⁹ In this transformative partnership, the University "faculty role changes and includes more involvement with the professional development of nurses as preceptors, coaches, and clinical teachers."^{10(p353)}

The key aspect of the DEU model is the partnership formed between administrators, nurse faculty, staff nurses, and students. Program evaluations have shown high student and staff satisfaction,^{11,12} positive learning environments for students and nurses,¹² significant learning opportunities for students,¹³ and higher quality of nursing instruction.¹⁴ Benefits to clinical practice included stronger evidence-based practice by nurses,^{2,9} increase in student confidence and competence in clinical care,¹⁵ and enhanced ability to work in interdisciplinary teams.² Moscato, Nishioka and Coe¹⁶ replicated the University of Portland DEU Model in two other nursing education programs and concluded that the DEU "continues to show promise in addressing the nursing faculty shortage, strengthening academic clinical collaborations, and improving clinical education outcomes for students" (p. 267).

The many positive education outcomes that have been shown have primarily involved DEU implementation in acute care settings. Increasingly, long-term care settings have been the focus of these types of innovative educational opportunities.^{17,18} There were no studies found specifically describing DEU's in Transitional Care Units.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to examine the feasibility of developing and implementing a dedicated education unit in long term care utilizing the Partners in Caring Model as the framework. The questions that guided the evaluation of the pilot program were: 1) What is the acceptability of the TC DEU by faculty, students, clinical staff and stakeholders?, 2) What are the challenges and benefits of implementing the TC DEU for the university and for the LTC institution?, and 3) What are recommendations for changes to improve the TC DEU?

Description of partners

The public university's School of Nursing's Baccalaureate program has offered co-requisite 7-week gerontological-rehabilitation nursing didactic and clinical practicum courses for over 5 years. Recognizing the imperative to incorporate the gerontological-rehabilitation nursing specialty in the Baccalaureate preparation for nurses, the intent of the University in entering this partnership was to establish a DEU which would further innovate the clinical preparation for students who participate through this 7-week clinical education model, to determine how a University faculty member could provide appropriate oversight and mentoring of the clinical teachers while assuring clinical objectives were being met by all students, and to assess the degree to which students were satisfied with the clinical placement and their ability to satisfactorily meet clinical performance requirements.

The long-term transitional care facility is a 33-bed, Medicare-certified skilled nursing facility specially designed for care of the post-acute patient. With a typical length of stay of 2–3 weeks, the unit offers nursing students the opportunity to develop their professional skills in a manner not possible in the hospital setting. By working with the nursing staff, patients, and their families during

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