



Is graduate entry education a solution to increasing numbers of men in nursing?

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ABSTRACT

Males have traditionally constituted a very small proportion of the nursing workforce in many countries, including Australia. Together with a need to address the gender imbalance, nursing workforce shortages require strategies for recruiting new nurses, including males. This study examined characteristics of males entering one accelerated graduate entry masters pre-registration nursing program in Victoria, Australia. A quantitative survey gathered a variety of demographic data and factors relating to participants' decisions to undertake nursing. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics including frequencies and distributions. Forty-three male nursing students from four cohorts of the Master of Nursing Practice (MNP) course from 2009 to 2011 completed the survey. The proportion of males (30%) was considerably greater than traditional nursing courses and the profession generally. Participants demonstrated wide distributions in age ranges, professional backgrounds and previous years in the workforce. Graduate entry appears attractive to males of varying ages, personal and professional backgrounds. More research is needed to examine this phenomenon on a larger scale.

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Introduction

In many countries, including Australia and the United States, men represent only a small population within the total nursing workforce. In 2011, men constituted 9.9% of the Australian registered nurse workforce, up slightly from 9.6% in 2007 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2012). In the United Kingdom, Curtis et al. (2009) reported that participation of males in the nursing workforce was in decline. In 2009 a masters level pre-registration nursing course was introduced at the authors' university. Beginning at that time, demographic characteristics of entering students was collected to inform teaching and learning, as well as to understand the types of people seeking to enter such a course. Broad data on these demographics has been published elsewhere (McKenna and Vanderheide, 2012). However, our analysis identified a higher percentage of males in the course when compared to our traditional three-year undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing degree courses, and suggested a need for more detailed investigation. This paper analyses findings relating to the characteristics of males

entering the program and suggests that graduate entry programs may offer opportunities to increase the proportion of males in the profession.

Literature review

Graduate entry education has gained momentum over recent years as an alternative pathway to nursing registration, and a means for meeting changing health workforce needs. These programs are often delivered at postgraduate level and in accelerated modes, while others integrate students with traditional undergraduate students (Pellico et al., 2012). Research around graduate entry suggests that students entering these courses are older and more highly motivated (Codier et al., 2015; Everett et al., 2013; McKenna and Vanderheide, 2012) than traditional students. Furthermore, they bring life experience and resilience that traditional students usually do not, as well as previous tertiary level study experience (Neill, 2012; Stacey et al., 2015). Recent studies on graduate entry education suggest that higher levels of males are entering these programs than has been seen traditionally (Everett et al., 2013; McKenna and Vanderheide, 2012; Rouse and Rooda, 2010).

In many countries men are significantly underrepresented in the nursing workforce. In 2011, males comprised only 9.9% of the

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registered nurse workforce in Australia (AIHW, 2012). A similar figure (9.6%) has been reported across the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013) and United Kingdom (Mohammed, 2012). Yet, it is argued that low proportions of men in nursing is only a phenomenon encountered in some countries (Sullivan, 2000), as many countries, including the Phillipines and Germany, are reported to have substantial sized male nurse numbers (Whittock and Leonard, 2003).

Much literature has explored the issue of men in nursing and challenges facing them when they enter the profession in female-dominated contexts. Many authors suggest that men entering nursing confront negative stereotypes of males (Hart, 2005; Meadus, 2000), including discrimination and homophobia (Nelson and Belcher, 2006), as well as being excluded from some speciality areas and procedures (Whittock and Leonard, 2003). In a study of non-nursing students in Canada, Bartfay et al. (2010) found that both males and females held negative attitudes and stereotypical perceptions of males in nursing, including that “they are gay, effeminate, less compassionate and caring than female nurses” (p.1). Furthermore, some men in nursing face perceptions that they move to senior positions and make it difficult for females to acquire such positions (Duffin, 2009). Men have been reported to describe feeling part of a minority group, being perceived as ‘uncaring’ or as ‘muscle’ for heavier tasks. Such stereotypical perspectives can lead to males experiencing feelings of awkwardness and defensiveness (Hart, 2005). In Canada, Meadus and Twomey (2007) conducted a survey with male nurses in Newfoundland and Labrador to explore why males chose to become nurses. While only a small scale study, participants reported a lack of suitable male role models and adverse media representation as negatively impacting on males seeking to enter nursing.

Men are reported to enter the nursing profession for a range of reasons. These include having the desire to care for and help people (Hart, 2005). The stable nature of nursing is also considered attractive, offering security of employment and salary (Christiansen and Knight, 2014; Roth and Coleman, 2008), as well as diversity of career opportunities and pathways (Hart, 2005; Meadus and Twomey, 2007) and opportunities for travel (Christiansen and Knight, 2014; Meadus and Twomey, 2007). With reported shortages of nurses and increasing ethnic, cultural and racial diversity among the Australian patient population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Health Workforce Australia, 2012), new approaches to recruitment that attract under-represented groups reflective of the general population into the nursing profession need to be considered. Armstrong (2002) identified that men often entered nursing as a second career after working in other areas. Roth and Coleman (2008) suggest that there are potential benefits from attracting male students who are older and bring diversity to the profession, however they argue there are many perceived and real barriers, particularly around perceptions of nursing as female work. Graduate entry programs, such as the Master of Nursing Practice, facilitate the entry of such individuals who bring to the profession diverse professional backgrounds that have the potential to complement the increasingly complex nursing professional role. This pre-registration course is offered in an intensive accelerated mode with four semesters delivered over 18 months duration. Understanding the characteristics of men entering such nursing courses can assist with targeting appropriate recruitment strategies.

Methods

Following ethical approval by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee, a survey was distributed to four cohorts of students on entry to the graduate entry Master of Nursing

Practice course at the university from 2009 to 2011. The survey sought various demographic characteristics, such as previous education, professional backgrounds and reasons for entering nursing in order to facilitate appropriate structuring of teaching and learning approaches. An academic member not directly involved in the students' course introduced the study to the students and sought their voluntary participation. Data were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences v.20). From the larger results, data from a sub-group of male students were extracted for separate analysis.

Findings

From the total students (males and females) who completed surveys ($n = 145$), 43 (30%) were males, a higher proportion than reported elsewhere across the nursing profession. This varied across the groups from 23 to 42% (Table 1) but still numbers in every cohort remained higher than in the profession more broadly.

Participants' ages demonstrated great variability. While the largest group were those in the 21–25 year age range (23%), all groups were represented (Table 2). Over half (53%) were aged between 31 and 45 years. This suggests that while many may have come in straight after completing an undergraduate degree, these males were entering the course at a variety of different phases in their lives.

Professional backgrounds

Males in the group were found to have had a variety of previous employment backgrounds prior to entering the course (Table 3) indicating a range of skills and knowledge sets being brought to their nursing roles. Of these, the largest groups reported coming from business ($n = 10$, 23%) or aged care and health ($n = 8$, 19%) backgrounds.

Participants' years in the workforce demonstrate further breadth. While the largest single group had been in the workforce for less than 5 years ($n = 15$, 35%), almost 40% had been in the workforce for more than 10 years (Table 4).

Considering nursing career

Participants were asked the reasons why they had made the move to study nursing. In answering the question, multiple answers were permitted and findings suggest that many students had a range of reasons for wanting to undertake nursing studies. Males in this group mostly reported seeking career stability, diverse practice opportunities and were seeking a caring profession (Table 5). Nine individuals suggested other reasons including having been made redundant in a previous occupation, wanting portability and flexibility and a desire to care for sick people.

Participants were asked to identify how long they had been considering a move to nursing. Findings suggest that this varied with 56% ($n = 24$) reporting having only considered this for up to a year, while 26% ($n = 11$) had been considering it for over two years (Table 6).

Table 1
Proportion of males in MNP.

Cohort	Total student numbers	Number of males	% of males
A	26	11	42
B	53	12	23
C	31	12	39
D	35	8	23
Total	145	43	30

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