



Psychiatric nursing students' experiences of having a mentor during their first practice placement: an Irish perspective

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Summary The concept of mentorship is widely advocated as a support mechanism for student nurse learning during practice placement. However there is a dearth of empirical work investigating mentorship programmes from the perspective of student nurses training to care for people with mental health problems. This paper reports on student psychiatric nurses' experiences and perceptions of having a mentor during their first practice placement. At the time of the study, in Ireland, students wishing to care for people with mental health problems were required to undertake a three-year diploma in psychiatric nursing. Successful completion of the programme meant that the student could apply to An Bord Altranais (Irish statutory regulatory body for nursing) to have their name entered on the psychiatric nurses' division of the register. The term registered psychiatric nurse corresponds to the term registered mental nurse in the UK.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from six students who had just completed their first practice placement. Findings suggest that having a mentor made a significant contribution to student learning. However, one student described difficulties caused by the absence of the named mentor and as a consequence, this student became preoccupied with 'fitting in' and 'learning the routine'. This was in sharp contrast to the other students who described the effective strategies utilised by their mentor to maximise the learning opportunities. Bearing in mind the small sample size and the fact that the study was completed following the students' first exposure to a mentor, the findings provide some useful insights on the value of having an effective support mechanism for psychiatric student nurses.

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Introduction

Psychiatric/mental health nursing is a practice-based profession, with clinical practice forming the central component of the programme of study. In Ireland, at the time of this study, students wishing to care for people with mental health problems were required to undertake a three year diploma in psychiatric nursing programme. Students who successfully completed the programme were eligible to apply to An Bord Altranais (Irish statutory regulatory body for nursing) to have their name entered on the psychiatric nurses' division of the register. The term registered psychiatric nurse corresponds to registered mental nurse in the UK. Since 2002, to be eligible to register as a psychiatric nurse in Ireland, students must complete a four-year degree in nursing (psychiatric) programme.

An Bord Altranais (2000) states that the major goal of nurse education and training is to equip the nursing student 'with the knowledge and skills necessary to practice as a competent and professional nurse' (p. 13). Consequently, students' clinical practice placement is fundamental in the preparation of nurses who are capable of effective action as well as 'knowing'. This paper reports on the findings from a qualitative study designed to elicit the students' experiences and perceptions of having a mentor during their first practice placement.

Literature review – role of the mentor

Mentorship or preceptorship are models of support that can be used to enable students gain maximum benefit from practice placements (Spouse, 1996; Gray and Smith, 2000; Jones et al., 2001). However, the literature reveals little empirical work on the role of the mentor or preceptor within a psychiatric/mental health nursing context.

Mentorship is widely acknowledged as a relationship between a more experienced professional and a less experienced person the student with the intention of fostering educational and professional development (Atkins and Williams, 1995). Wright (1990) describes the mentor as a clinical role model who will act as a resource person, guide and assume responsibility for identifying learning goals together with developing and reviewing student's learning contracts. Gunner (1988) stresses the pastoral role of the mentor and includes issues such as caring and building confidence. Morris et al. (1988) not only include the concept of role model but also

incorporate the roles of supervisor and assessor. Whilst Barker (1995) and Jarvis (1995) suggest that the mentor should be a facilitator of reflective practice.

The issue of whether assessment should be included as part of the mentor's role is much debated. There is clear evidence that in some institutions the mentoring role is closely linked with that of the assessor whilst in other institutions the mentor stands apart from the assessor (Wilson-Barnett et al., 1995; Phillips et al., 1996a,b). The lack of a formal support mechanism in the event of the student receiving an unsatisfactory grade from the mentor is another issue that is highlighted (Anforth, 1992). Writers that favour the inclusion of assessment make the point that feedback from staff outside the mentoring relationship may lack perceived credibility, and stress the importance of feedback from the person who works closely with the student on an ongoing basis (Woodrow, 1994).

Benefits of having a mentor

In studies in the UK positive outcomes reported include increased confidence, self-esteem and competence in 'basic' nursing, increased feedback and greater clarity for the student regarding their role (Foy and Waltho, 1989; Wright, 1990; Gray and Smith, 2000). Students reported that good mentors valued their contribution to and participation in patient care. They were also willing to spend quality time with the student and tailored their teaching to match the needs of the individual student (Gray and Smith, 2000). In Phillips et al. (1996a,b) study students who had mentors reported 'being well looked after and having an overall positive regard towards their clinical experience' (p. 1085). The remainder of this paper focuses on the study design and findings from interviews held with psychiatric nursing students on completion of their first practice placement.

The study

The aim of the study was to explore psychiatric student nurses' experiences of having a mentor during their first practice placement with a view to identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the mentoring process.

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