



Review

A systematic review of the effectiveness of strategies and interventions to improve the transition from student to newly qualified nurse



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ABSTRACT

Background: The transition from student to newly qualified nurse can be stressful for many newly qualified nurses who feel inadequately prepared. A variety of support strategies to improve the transition process have been reported across the international literature but the effectiveness of such strategies is unknown.

Objectives/aim: To determine the effectiveness of the main strategies used to support newly qualified nurses during the transition into the clinical workplace and, where identified, evaluate the impact of these on individual and organisational outcomes.

Design: Systematic review.

Data sources: A search of electronic databases to identify published studies (CINAHL, MEDLINE, British Nursing Index, Cochrane Library, EMBASE, PsychLit, PsychINFO, PsychARTICLES, Web Of Science, EBM Reviews, BioMed, TRIP, ERIC, SCOPUS (January 2000–April 2011)) was conducted. Relevant journals were hand-searched and reference lists from retrieved studies were reviewed to identify any further studies. The search was restricted to English language papers. The key words used were words that described new graduate nurses and support strategies (e.g. internship, residency, orientation programmes). **Review methods:** The inclusion criteria were quantitative studies that investigated the effectiveness of support strategies for newly qualified graduate nurses. Studies that involved students in their final year of graduate study were excluded (for example extern programmes). Extraction of data was undertaken independently by two reviewers. A further two reviewers assessed the methodological quality against agreed criteria.

Results: A total of 8199 studies were identified from the database search and 30 met the inclusion criteria for the review. The evidence suggests that transition interventions/strategies do lead to improvements in confidence and competence, job satisfaction, critical thinking and reductions in stress and anxiety for the newly qualified nurse.

Conclusions: This systematic review demonstrates the beneficial effects of transitional support strategies for newly qualified nurses from the perspective of the new nurse and their employer. The overall impact of support strategies appears positive, irrespective of the type of support provided. This may suggest that it is the organisations' focus on new graduate nurses that is important, rather than simply leaving them to acclimatise to their new role themselves. Future research should involve well designed randomised controlled trials with larger sample sizes, using more objective and reliable outcome measures.

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What is already known about the topic?

- The transition from nursing student to qualified nurse can be traumatic for many nurses.
- A number of initiatives, such as residency/internships programmes, transition programmes, preceptorship and mentorship have been introduced mainly on a local basis to try and ease the transition.
- Little is known about the structure, content and duration of successful programmes to reduce problems and which, if any, actually impact on key outcomes for both the individual and the employing organisation.

What this paper adds

- Within each group of interventions, the review identifies there are considerable variations in their content, structure and duration, making the adoption of effective solutions difficult.
- Evaluation studies of transition solutions varied in methodological approach and quality; many had weak designs.
- Nearly all the forms of intervention led to successful outcomes and this may indicate that it is not the intervention per se that matters, but the signalling by the organisation to newly qualified nurses that they are regarded as important, and that attempts are being made to help them into their new roles as painlessly as possible.

1. Introduction

Globally, nurses can find the transition from nursing student to qualified nurse stressful and intimidating despite ongoing attempts to address this problem (Butler and Hardin-Pierce, 2005; Dearmun, 1998; Gerrish, 2000; Levett-Jones and FitzGerald, 2005; Maben, 1998; Oermann and Garvin, 2002; Oermann and Moffitt-Wolf, 1997; O'Shea and Kelly, 2007).

A poor experience during this transition period can delay newly qualified nurses reaching their full potential. Those who feel overwhelmed may leave the profession altogether (Park and Jones, 2010), or leave their first job within less than 12 months (Beecroft et al., 2001). The consequence of this is an exacerbation of already stretched staffing levels and a loss of investment made in the preparation of staff. To counteract this, attempts have been made to ease the transition by providing strategies that might have a direct impact on increasing confidence and reducing anxiety and stress in the individual and decreasing turnover rates and improving retention in organisations.

A variety of support strategies to improve the transition process have been reported in the international literature. These range from structured to more informal approaches. Structured approaches such as graduate programmes (Johnstone et al., 2008), residency programmes (Goode and Williams, 2004; Happell and Gough, 2007; Olson et al., 2001; Williams et al., 2007), orientation programmes (O'Malley Floyd et al., 2005; Young et al., 2008) and nurse internships (Beecroft et al., 2001; Ulrich et al., 2010).

Informal approaches reported include mentoring (Melnyk, 2007), lecturer/practitioner support (Dearmun, 2000), preceptorship (Hardyman and Hickey 2001; Robinson and Griffiths, 2009), clinical practice facilitators (Agnew, 2000) and peer support (Brown, 2000). All of these approaches aim to increase the confidence, competence and sense of belonging of new graduates. Currently, there is little agreement in terms of what constitutes best practice and limited available evidence on the effectiveness of such approaches in achieving these aims and outcomes.

The literature review conducted by FitzGerald et al. (2001), considered the effects of transition support on a wide variety of employer outcomes (retention rates, levels of competency, costs, satisfaction) and new graduate outcomes (anxiety reduction, job satisfaction, role recognition, satisfaction with programme/intervention, knowledge acquisition, role consolidation and level of expectations met). Thirteen studies were included in the review; of these many were descriptive studies with very few comparative studies. The conclusion was that programmes using multiple strategies over an extended period are useful. Nevertheless, there is a lack of evidence to indicate the optimal structure, length and content of programmes. Where single support strategies were implemented their success was influenced by the characteristics of individuals involved. The success of preceptorship programmes was dependent on the preceptors being experienced, selected on specific criteria, and provided with training and support. As far as peer-support groups were concerned, informal, unsupervised support was more effective than facilitator-led support groups. However, this evidence was based on a small number of studies with low scientific quality ratings. In terms of employer outcomes of recruitment and retention, there was no evidence to indicate which type of programme was more effective but some weak evidence to suggest that all strategies assist in the retention of new graduates. For new graduate outcomes, there was no evidence to determine which of these strategies was more effective in reducing anxiety and enhancing social integration. There were conflicting results for strategies that aimed to improve levels of competence.

A narrative literature review was undertaken of Australian transition programmes (Levett-Jones and FitzGerald, 2005) which included elements of formal or informal preceptorships or mentorships, study days or formal orientation programmes. It was found that transition programmes differed in duration, structure, financial support and content across the country. No formal investigation of the effectiveness of these programmes was conducted within this review. However, the authors did suggest that formal orientation programmes can have a positive impact on graduates' transition to practice, whereas mentorship and preceptorship have the potential to reduce the "reality shock" described by Kramer (1974).

A systematic review was conducted to determine the effectiveness of retention strategies targeted at new graduate nurses in the United States of America (USA) (Salt et al., 2008). Retention strategies were categorised as

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