



Twenty-five years of critical care nursing scholarship in Australia

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SUMMARY

Background: *Australian Critical Care* has been published since 1988 and has been an important medium for the development of critical care nursing scholarship in Australia over 25 years.

Purpose: To review scholarship in critical care nursing in Australia since 1988 and record its progress in the context of developments in nursing education and intensive and critical care practice.

Approach: *Australian Critical Care* issues since 1988 were reviewed, and abstracts from the Australian and New Zealand Annual Scientific Meeting on Intensive Care published in *Australian Critical Care* since the 1991 Meeting. Available evidence for the contribution of this body of scholarship to critical care nursing practice and patient care was considered.

Results: Original research reports and review articles have steadily increased from 1988 to 2012. The peak years for research publications were 2001, 2005 and 2012, and for reviews 2010 and 2011. Approximately 760 abstracts were presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting from 1991 to 2010; overall 24% were found lead to peer-reviewed publications, with an increase to 30% in recent years.

Summary: Over 25 years, the scholarship of critical care nursing in Australia has evolved into an established area of disciplinary knowledge, based firmly in practice. Our discipline has witnessed the opportunity for PhD training, the introduction of professorial positions, a knowledge base built on original research and rigorous reviews, and sustainable dissemination. The challenges are to further strengthen this development, increase publication of research that is done, to demonstrate the influence on practice and to develop sustainable research funding.

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Introduction

The birth and growth of critical care nursing as a professional specialty in Australia has been well documented in the publication of the Australian College of Critical Care Nurses, 'There's a Bird in My Hand and a Bear by the Bed: I Must be in ICU'.¹ Another decade has passed since then, and of similar importance, this journal has now been in publication for over 25 years, with the first issue printed in 1988.

In this paper, we review 25 years of scholarship in critical care nursing in Australia within the context of developments in nursing education and intensive and critical care practice. Our discussion focuses on the scholarly development of critical care nursing toward a practice-based academic discipline, with a defined body

of knowledge, together with related methods of dissemination and communication within a community of practice and scholarship. As a professional college, the Australian College of Critical Care Nurses (ACCCN) provides a range of resources that support scholarship in the discipline, notably through *Australian Critical Care*, funding of research grants for members and co-hosting the Annual Australian and New Zealand Annual Scientific Meeting on Intensive Care (the ASM) with our intensivists colleagues from the Australian and New Zealand Intensive Care Society. At the ASM, prizes have been awarded for the Best Nursing Free Paper since 1983, the Nursing Scholarship Prize since 1996 and the Best Nursing Review Paper since 1997.

For the purposes of this paper, scholarship includes peer-reviewed reports of original research and reviews of the research literature, plus abstracts of original research and literature reviews selected by peer review for presentation at scientific meetings. We initially provide some context with a brief overview of undergraduate and postgraduate nursing education in Australia since the 1980s, including the introduction of higher degrees by research (masters and doctoral degrees) in nursing within Australian universities. Next we examine the publication of original research and

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reviews of the research literature in *Australian Critical Care* from 1988 to 2012, followed by a summary of the nursing abstracts presented at the Australian and New Zealand ASM on Intensive Care from 1992 to 2010 that were translated into full-text publications in the peer-reviewed literature. Finally the contribution of this body of nursing scholarship to critical care nursing practice and patient care is considered.

Transfer of nursing education to the higher education sector

In the 1980s and 1990s there were significant changes in nursing education across the State and Territory jurisdictions, with the transfer of hospital-based registered nurse training programs to undergraduate preregistration education in the higher education sector. Postregistration programs for specialty nursing practice, which were mainly hospital-based at that time, were then subsequently also largely replaced by postgraduate university programs. Of particular importance from a scholarship perspective, nurses were able to access all levels of education with research training through Masters and Doctoral degrees in nursing after unification of the higher education sector when schools or faculties of nursing were established in universities.

Undergraduate education

In 1984 the Australian government announced its support for the full transfer of preregistration nursing education from state-run hospitals to the tertiary education sector. This development saw the introduction of the 3-year Diploma of Applied Science (Nursing) in colleges of advanced education or universities, with full transfer to the tertiary sector by 1993. Subsequently the nursing profession's target of a Bachelor of Nursing preparation for registered nurses in universities was achieved in the early 1990s. This was facilitated by the national unification of colleges of advanced education into the university sector, with preregistration education funded by the Commonwealth Government.^{2,3} The first state to achieve full transfer was NSW in 1985, while other states phased the transfer from hospital to tertiary programs more gradually, with Queensland having its last entry to hospital-based programs in 1990.²

Postgraduate education for specialty practice

Following the transfer of undergraduate nursing education to the tertiary sector there was rapid growth in postgraduate nursing courses for specialty practice at the Certificate, Diploma and Masters levels,^{3–5} notably in clinical specialties but also in fields such as education and management. Students of Graduate Diploma programs often continued on to Masters of Nursing degrees, while other diplomates later returned to university to complete masters degrees.⁵ Postgraduate critical care courses were established in universities in each state between 1990 and 1997, often in collaboration with hospitals or wider health services.¹ While ACCCN does not record specific qualifications of members, in 2012 their records showed that members reported 3463 qualifications in intensive/critical care nursing, 488 in education and 262 in management. (Note these numbers exceed the total number of members responding to the survey as respondents could indicate that they had more than one qualification).

Higher degrees by research

Following the merging of colleges of advanced education into the university sector in 1990, nurses were finally able to undertake Masters in Nursing by research and Doctorates of Philosophy (PhD) within the discipline of nursing.³ Prior to this, some nurses with Bachelors Degrees completed nursing-related topics in research

degrees within schools or faculties such as health sciences or sociology. More recently the option of the Doctorate in Nursing (DN), a form of professional doctorate, has become available in Australia. This form of qualification is intended to be more orientated to advancing professional practice than the traditional PhD intended for those wishing to pursue research/academic careers.⁶

The numbers of *Australian Critical Care* nurses with masters by research and doctoral degrees is not recorded, but anecdotally numbers have increased considerably since 1990. This is evidenced to some extent by the numbers of applicants for the Nursing Scholarship Prize at the ASM, whose presentations must be from their higher degree research studies, as well as the qualifications listed by Australian authors in *Australian Critical Care* and other journals for which we perform editorial and review duties. In the 2012 ACCCN survey, 116 respondents reported that they had research qualifications, but this may be an underestimate as not all members complete the survey.

Increasing numbers of *Australian Critical Care* nurses with doctoral qualifications means that there are increasingly more potential supervisors for research degree students, increasingly including Bachelor Honours as well as masters and doctoral candidates. Through their publications, graduates of these degrees continue to contribute to the expansion of knowledge for the care of the critically ill in Australia and internationally.

Related to this is the development of the nurse academic role in critical care with the potential to make an impact on the care of patients through their own research, the work of their coursework and research students, and academic leadership. Nurses with PhD training and a developing publication track record were eligible for both academic promotion and newly created roles as professors of critical care nursing, often as conjoint appointments with partner health services. These conjoint appointments, colloquially referred to as clinical chairs, are primarily based in the health service and have regular contact with clinical critical care nurses. This facilitates ready access by critical care nurses to academic advice and support for development of research ideas and evidence-based practice based on published research, plus currency in practice-based research for the clinical chairs.

The first chair in critical care nursing in Australia was established in 1993, and three are currently four professors with critical care nursing in their job title, as well as a number of professors in university-based positions who cite critical care as their core area of scholarship.

Publications in *Australian Critical Care*, 1988–2012

Reports of original research and review articles published in *Australian Critical Care* have both increased over 25 years. To evaluate the numeric contribution of publications we examined the Tables of Contents (TOC) of every issue of the journal from 1988 [1(1)] to 2012 [25(3), plus articles in press on 30th August, 2012]. Articles listed as Research Papers in the TOC or had titles denoting research (e.g. an observational study or a randomized controlled trial) were classified as research. When the titles were ambiguous, abstracts were reviewed to determine whether the articles were original research, reviews or neither. Results are shown in Fig. 1. During the first six years (1988–1993) there were very few original research articles (1 each in 1990, 1991, 1992) or reviews (2 in 1992 and 1 review in 1993). Peak years for research articles were 2001 ($n = 12$) and 2005 ($n = 11$), with some variability from year to year but an overall increase over time. Review papers peaked at 6 each in 2010 and 2011 (Fig. 1). Of note, the review articles published over this time demonstrated a qualitative trend to more explicit search and rigorous review methods in recent years, such as systematic reviews, in keeping with trends in nursing and health care literature generally. A search of the Elsevier database ScopusTM shows

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