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Graduate Nurse Program Coordinators' perspectives on graduate nurse programs in Victoria, Australia: A descriptive qualitative approach



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Summary

Aims: The purpose of this study was to describe the formal preparation nursing graduates are given throughout their first year of nursing in terms of educational structure and content of work-based year-long graduate nurse programs, from the perspectives of Graduate Nurse Program Coordinators.

Background: In Australia, graduate nurse programs aim to provide a supportive learning environment, assisting nursing graduates in applying their theory to practice and supporting them in becoming safe, competent and responsible professionals. Internationally, research has demonstrated an increase in the job satisfaction and more importantly retention rates of newly qualified nurses who are supported in their first year of employment in some type of transition program.

Method: Using a descriptive qualitative approach, individual semi-structured interviews were used. These interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed to reveal themes and sub-themes.

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Results: The interviews provided an insight into the various aspects of preparation that nursing graduates are given in their first year of practice with the main theme to emerge from analysis, nature of transition programs. The three subthemes associated with nature of transition programs consisted of composition of rotations and study days and supernumerary strategies. Findings indicate variation in pedagogical models underpinning graduate nurse programs across Victoria. Clinical rotations varied between three to twelve months, the number of study days offered were between four and thirteen days and there was variation in supernumerary time and strategies within the programs investigated.

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1. Introduction and background

In Australia, nursing students undertake a three-year full-time tertiary nursing program and register to practise as Registered Nurses (RN) with the national regulatory body on successful completion of this program. Internationally, within the literature new nursing graduates have reported struggling with the transition from academia to the health care setting, where they experience a variety of challenges, stressors and more significantly, a high attrition rate (Cubit & Ryan, 2011; Phillips, Kenny, Esterman, & Smith, 2014; Wolff, Regan, Pesut, & Black, 2010). To assist nursing graduates with transition from student to independent practitioner, transition support programs have been developed and are offered by health care settings in a variety of formats (Anderson, Hair, & Toder, 2012; Hoffart, Waddell, & Young, 2011; Missen, McKenna, & Beauchamp, 2014a; Rush, Adamack, Gordon, Lilly, & Janke, 2012). Internationally, programs vary in length from eight weeks to twelve months. In Australia, the majority of hospitals offer formalised twelve-month work-based graduate nurse programs. Overall, these programs aim to facilitate transition from academia to professional practice, allowing newly qualified nurses to consolidate their theory into practice, and adapt to their new roles as RNs, in their first year of professional practice, with the ultimate aim of improving quality of care through increased job satisfaction and retention rates (Clare & van Loon, 2003; Johnstone, Kanitsaki, & Currie, 2008; Vittrup & Davey, 2010).

Graduate nurse programs (GNPs) in Australia are not compulsory but highly recommended to registered nurse graduates to provide them with supportive learning environments, and assist them in becoming safe, competent and accountable professionals (Department of Health, 2014; Healy & Howe, 2012). These formalised programs offer graduates professional development days, preceptorship, supernumerary time and clinical support by experienced graduate resource nurses (Cubit & Ryan, 2011; Rush et al., 2012; Vittrup & Davey, 2010). The State government in Victoria supports public hospitals by providing training and development grants of \$17,162 for each full-time nursing graduate employed and supported by the health service in a graduate nurse program (Department of Health, 2013). This monetary figure is proposed to cover costs incurred by health services in providing support and education in the manner of study/orientation days, supernumerary time and wages of support staff such as educators and graduate nurse program coordinators (Department of Health, 2009; Healy & Howe, 2012). Graduate nurse program coordinators (GNPC)

are responsible for the overall administration of these programs including; recruitment of new graduates, allocation of rotations, facilitation of study days, and providing both clinical and emotional support to all nursing graduates (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2003).

The Victorian Department of Health (2009) provides guidance to health services about the structure and content of graduate nurse programs though it does not stipulate a particular model of program delivery. Reports in the literature suggest that graduate nurse programs vary widely in both content and quality both nationally and internationally (Johnstone et al., 2008; Levett-Jones & Fitzgerald, 2006; Missen et al., 2014a; Rush et al., 2012) and with nearly three decades of experience with transition programs in Australia, little evidence exists about the actual composition of the individual programs. Variations have been noted in the length, number and type of clinical rotations, nature of preceptorship models, supernumerary time, number and content of study days and formal orientation (Levett-Jones & Fitzgerald, 2006; Missen et al., 2014a; Rush et al., 2012). Despite the use of these programs, research indicates that the transition from student to nursing graduate remains challenging and stressful (Cubit & Ryan, 2011; Evans, Boxer, & Sanber, 2006; Phillips et al., 2014; Salt, Cummings, & Profetto-Mcgrath, 2008). With limited research on the educational model underpinning graduate nurse programs in Victoria, further research needs to explore what constitutes best practice for transition programs and identify critical elements required to effectively support new nursing graduates in their first year of practice. This qualitative study adds previously unheard voices to this debate by exploring GNPCs' viewpoints on the structure of their individual graduate nurse programs in Victoria and provides an understanding of the strategies put in place to ensure new graduates have the best learning opportunities and support throughout their first year of professional practice.

2. Methods

The purpose of this study was to describe formal preparation in terms of study days, theoretical content and supernumerary strategies nursing graduates are provided with throughout their first year of nursing, whilst employed in work based year-long graduate nurse programs. The participants were GNPCs who were purposefully chosen as they were deemed 'information rich' (Borbasi, Jackson, & Langford, 2008) and able to provide in-depth knowledge on graduate nurse programs due to their supervisory role. Participants

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