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# Factors influencing the supervision of nursing students administering medication: The registered nurse perspective

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Supervision

**Summary** Administering medication is an important function of registered nurses. It is therefore necessary that nursing students develop knowledge and skill in this field. Given the propensity for, and negative consequences of, medication errors, it is essential that nursing students are properly supervised in this role. There is currently a paucity of research examining the practices of supervising medication administration by nursing students, particularly from the perspectives of registered nurses. The aim of this study was to explore the opinions and insights of registered nurses regarding the supervision of nursing students administering medication. Focus groups were conducted with registered nurses with experience of working with students in the clinical environment. Focus groups were transcribed verbatim and data analysis was conducted using the five stage framework approach. Four main themes were identified that reflected the participants' views of the factors most strongly influencing the provision of supervision: communication, busyness, attitudes, and pressure to conform. The participants identified the importance of providing student supervision and suggested strategies for improvement, such as a closer working relationship between the clinical facilitator and the registered nurses providing supervision.

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## Introduction

The administration of medication is a key responsibility of the registered nurse (Reid-Searl, Moxham, Walker, & Happell, 2008) and is therefore a vital skill that nursing students must acquire prior to graduation. The opportunity to practice this skill in the clinical setting is therefore paramount (Honey & Lim, 2008; Reid-Searl, Moxham, Walker, & Happell, 2010b). While learning opportunities for nursing students is important, this must occur according to processes and procedures that maintain the safety and well being of patients (Reid-Searl, Moxham, & Happell, 2010). This background section will explore medication administration by nursing students in relation to: the importance of supervision; medication errors; safety and quality care.

Supervision and support is a priority across the board for undergraduate nursing students (Brammer, 2008; Vallant & Neville, 2006; Waldock, 2010). However, in the case of medication administration it is particularly pertinent due to the high risk associated with this procedure (Burgess, 2009; Evans, 2009; Fogarty & McKeon, 2006; Reid-Searl, Moxham, & Happell, 2010). Research findings suggest that one or more medication errors occurs in approximate 2% of admission to Australian hospitals (Runciman, Roughead, Semple, & Adams, 2003). This figure is likely to underestimate the reality because registered nurses may not report medication errors due to fear of the associated repercussions (Evans, Berry, & Smith, 2006; Fogarty & McKeon, 2006).

Research examining medication errors at the point of administration tends to focus on registered nurses (Burgess, 2009; Evans et al., 2006; Fogarty & McKeon, 2006; Fry & Dacey, 2007; Greenfield, 2007; Harne-Britner, Kreamer, & Frownfelter, 2006; Hodgkinson, Koch, Nay, & Nichols, 2006). However, the involvement of students in medication errors has been identified (Harding & Petrick, 2008; Reid-Searl et al., 2010b; Wolf, Hicks, & Serembus, 2006). In addition to suggesting that medication errors by nursing students are more frequent than anticipated, factors contributing to the errors have been identified. These included knowledge deficits and inexperience (Wolf et al., 2006) and factors within the organisation itself such as busyness (Harding & Petrick, 2008). Adequate supervision by a registered nurse was identified in only one of these studies (Reid-Searl et al., 2010b), even though it would seem to be of great importance in addressing the problems created by knowledge deficits, inexperience and organisational characteristics. The limited discussion about supervision in the literature is somewhat surprising given the legal responsibility registered nurses have for the administration of medication (Queensland Parliamentary Council, 1996).

Supervision was identified as the central category in a grounded theory study of nursing students' experiences in the administration of medication. The students were aware of both the legal responsibilities of registered nurses and the expectation of the university that they administer medication only when supervised directly and in person by a registered nurse. However, the student participants indicated that direct supervision was frequently not provided (Reid-Searl et al., 2008). They identified the absence of direct supervision as a source of considerable stress (Reid-Searl, Moxham, Walker, & Happell, 2009) and felt torn

between the expectations of the university and those of the registered nurses they worked with. Some participants accepted supervision of a lesser standard than required because they feared the repercussions from the registered nurses, particularly as they were responsible for assessing the students as competent or otherwise at the completion of the clinical placement (Reid-Searl, Moxham, Walker, & Happell, 2010d).

Safety and quality of care had been compromised by the lack of adequate supervision, some participants had been involved in a medication error or what they termed as a 'near miss' (Reid-Searl, Moxham, & Happell, 2010). Interestingly, the participants adopted certain behaviours in the attempt to receive direct supervision, including negotiating with the registered nurse, chasing or waiting until the required supervision could be provided, and avoiding administering medication with nurses who did not provide direct supervision (Reid-Searl et al., 2010b).

The extent to which registered nurses provided the required degree of supervision was influenced by a number of factors including, the attitudes of registered nurses and their willingness or otherwise to working with students, communication for the university and the busyness of the unit and whether there was adequate time for supervision (Reid-Searl, Moxham, Walker, & Happell, 2010c).

The limited research addressing this topic, suggests that supervision of nursing students administering medication is highly complex and influenced by a number of factors. Harm to patients can result when nursing students administer medications, therefore the lack of research in this area is concerning. As registered nurses are expected to provide this supervision, it is important that their perspective is articulated. In light of this, the aim of the current study is to explore the experiences and opinions of registered nurses who work with undergraduate nursing students in a supervisory capacity.

## Methods

### Design

Due to the paucity of research in this area, and the intention for an in-depth understanding of registered nurses opinions and experiences, a qualitative exploratory methodology was adopted (Stebbins, 2001). Qualitative exploratory research is an approach that allows participants to contribute their own views and insights with the view to increase the understanding and knowledge of a specific area of nursing practice, in this case the administration of medication.

### Participants

This research was conducted in a public health care facility in regional Queensland. Registered nurses who have been involved in the supervision of undergraduate nursing students were sought for participation in the project. Following the recruitment stage 13 nurses were interviewed in one of two focus groups. The participants comprised 12 females and one male from a broad range of specialty areas across

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