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Nursing students' intentions to enter primary health care as a career option: Findings from a national survey



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Summary This paper reports findings from the first phase of a national study conducted to identify the intention of nursing students' to work in a Primary Health Care setting following registration. An online survey of final year nursing students enrolled at Australian universities offering education leading to eligibility for registration as a nurse with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency was undertaken during July–August 2014. Data were collected about students' intention to enter Primary Health Care as a career option, as well as their exposure to primary health care during their nursing education and whether they had undertaken practice placements in a primary health care setting. Analysis was conducted on 456 completed surveys. The findings demonstrated that, despite the majority (98.2%; $n = 447$) of students being exposed to Primary Health Care during their studies, less than a quarter (22.8%; $n = 104$) of the students who responded identified this as an area in which they intended to work following registration. No association was found between students' clinical experiences and their identification of primary health care as a career preference. Given the ageing population in Australia, the increased prevalence of chronic health issues and the predicted ongoing primary health care workforce shortages, educational and workplace strategies aimed at attracting new graduate nurse into Primary Health Care settings are imperative.

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1. Introduction and background

Australia, like many other countries around the world, is facing increasing healthcare pressures. The ageing population and the growing prevalence of chronic illness combined with a growing demand for accessible healthcare services have emphasised the need for a sustainable, skilled healthcare workforce. Notably, this has also focused attention on the importance of the primary health care workforce (Department of Health and Ageing, 2010). The role of registered nurses within Primary Health Care (PHC) is central, not only to the delivery of healthcare, but also to the implementation of health promotion initiatives, preventative strategies and integration of health care services (Australian Nursing Federation, 2009). Nurses working in the PHC setting, therefore, require the requisite skills and knowledge to perform a diverse array of tasks ranging from wound care, health checks and immunisations to health education, care coordination and resource management (Phillips, Pearce, & Dwan, 2008; Porritt, 2007).

Recent government initiatives targeted at increasing the numbers of PHC nurses working in general practice have centred on retaining the existing workforce and supporting the transitioning of experienced registered nurses from the acute care hospital sector to the PHC setting (Halcomb, Davidson, & Brown, 2010; Russell, 2013). While these strategies have resulted in an increase in the total number of nurses employed in general practice (Australian Medicare Local Alliance, 2012), an overall deficit in the number of nurses employed within PHC remains evident (Peters, Halcomb, & McInnes, 2013). Of further concern is the ageing nursing workforce in Australia which jeopardises the future sustainability of the PHC nursing workforce (Crettenden et al., 2014). By 2025, it is predicted that Australia will face a nursing shortage of an estimated 110,000 nurses (Crettenden et al., 2014; Health Workforce Australia (HWA, 2012)). It can therefore, be anticipated that this shortfall of nurses in Australia will further impact the PHC nursing workforce deficit. The ongoing development and sustainability of the PHC nursing workforce in Australia is essential for meeting the future healthcare needs of the population. Clearly, this is an issue that requires consideration by policy-makers, academics, clinicians and managers. A potential PHC nursing workforce source that remains largely unexplored is newly qualified registered nurses. This may be due to a lack of opportunities for newly registered nurses to work in this area. An ongoing but unfounded belief that newly graduated nurses should start their careers in the acute setting may have also contributed to the under utilisation of this potential workforce. An understanding of the future career plans of nursing students as well as their knowledge and experience of PHC will help to inform the best ways in which this potential workforce can be best supported and facilitated to work within the PHC setting.

A number of studies in Australia have been undertaken during the past five years to explore the career choices of nursing students. For example, Hickey and Harrison (2013) recently utilised a cross-sectional survey to identify the career preferences of nursing students ($n=209$) enrolled in different degree pathways in a Bachelor of

Nursing program at one rural Australian university. Findings revealed that, although the majority of students (70%) were from a rural background, less than half (45%) indicated a desire to work in a rural location once qualified. The preferences of students to work in specific areas, such as PHC, were not reported in this study. Birks, Al-Motlaq, and Mills (2010) in a single-centre study sought to determine the career aspirations of students entering nursing degree programs via traditional and alternative entry routes at a university in Victoria. They found that students ($n=125$) identified midwifery, emergency and paediatrics as preferred areas of future practice. PHC was not reported by students as a chosen area of future practice.

A profile of career preferences of student nurses and the rationale for their choices was developed following a longitudinal study of undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing students enrolled at three New South Wales universities (Stevens, 2011). Participants ($n=150$) ranked their career preferences from a list of ten choices each year for a total of three years. This study found that surgical nursing was the most popular career choice, whereas developmental disability nursing was consistently ranked the least favoured choice. Interestingly, community health was consistently ranked fifth and sixth across the three years, indicating that it was not a popular choice. In contrast, McCann, Clark, and Lu (2010) surveyed nursing students from one university in Victoria once each year throughout the duration of their degree (a total of three surveys in three years). First and second year students reported that they wanted to work in acute care (adult or paediatric nursing) or midwifery following registration. This changed to acute adult care in the third year with mental health nursing chosen as the second most attractive preference. Aged care was consistently ranked the least popular career preference by the students across all three years. Primary health care was not identified as a preference of students in the study.

To date, recent Australian studies that have explored the career preferences of student nurses reveal that PHC is not considered a priority area to work following registration (Parker, Keleher, & Forrest, 2011). Information to explain the reasons for this is limited and further research to explore this issue needs to be conducted. This is of particular importance given current and projected future PHC nursing workforce shortages and the potential role new graduate nurses may play in further developing and sustaining the PHC nursing workforce of the future. This paper presents findings from a large national study that explored the views of nursing students', practice nurses and practice managers towards a transition program to PHC for new graduate nurses. Findings from the component of the study that explored the views of final year nursing students are reported in this paper.

2. Study aim and objectives

This component of the study aimed to identify the intentions of final year (pre-registration) nursing students' to enter PHC as a career option following registration. Further study objectives sought to identify any association between nursing students' exposure to PHC during their education

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