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## Full Length Article

# Strategies to facilitate professional development of the occupational health nurse in the occupational health setting



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Education and experience are important components in the ability of occupational health nurses (OHNs) to promote high-quality care and competence. OHNs will increasingly require the skills and knowledge to base care on best evidence, to use critical thinking and demonstrate advanced leadership and decision-making skills to develop and enhance services in a more complex and diverse occupational healthcare environment.

**Objective:** The purpose of this study was to identify the needs for professional development of the OHN in the occupational health setting.

**Method:** An explorative, descriptive, contextual generic and qualitative research method was used in this study. The purposive sampling method was used as the OHNs surveyed described their personal need for professional development in the occupational health setting. Data was collected by means of semi-structured individual interviews. Eight interviews were done by an interviewer who held a doctoral degree in community health nursing and a qualification in occupational health and was affiliated with a private occupational health institution at the time of the study. The interviews were conducted during August 2012.

**Results:** The OHNs reported that professional development needs have to be identified by the OHNs. Short courses need to be designed by training institutions and should be attended by the OHNs to improve their operational functioning on a day-to-day basis in the occupational health setting. The OHNs experienced that their role and function in the workplace were not valued by their managers. The results of this study revealed four major themes, namely constraints hindering the OHN in developing professionally, positive aspects identified by the OHNs regarding the need for professional development, professional development needs of the OHN and suggestions of how to meet the OHNs' professional development needs.

**Conclusion:** There is a need for OHNs to identify their professional development needs and recommendations were made to meet these needs.

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## 1. Introduction and background

Occupational health is a diverse specialisation of healthcare with a holistic approach to enhancing the relationship between work, the workplace and the employee's health and wellbeing (Wicht, 2011).

OHNs work in numerous and diverse settings, including industry, construction, health services, banking and mining. They can be employed as an independent nurse or as part of a larger team which is often attached to a personnel department or as part of a professional occupational health outsourced service.

In developed countries, international reform is taking place in matters affecting the health of the worker. The importance of education of the medical and nursing profession in occupational health matters is increasingly recognised and thus through undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, both medical and nursing students receive more information and teaching in occupational health. This results in more qualified medical and nursing personnel being employed by industry, and better coordinated state-sponsored basic and applied research into health hazards relating to the working environment being undertaken (Wicht, 2011). Education and experience are important components in OHNs' ability to promote high-quality care and perform a satisfactory job, but a great deal depends on their work circumstances and the demands and opportunities in the workplace (Hallin & Danielson, 2008). Acquiring professional competence is a lifelong continuing process and is therefore not completed at graduation. OHNs are educated to improve the quality of practice, carry out research-based practice and be responsible for keeping up to date with developments in the profession (Hallin & Danielson, 2008).

Courses in occupational health nursing, based on Regulation 212 of February 1993, of the South African Nursing Council, are offered by a variety of institutions around the country. Successful candidates are awarded either a diploma or a Bachelor's Degree of Technology, depending on the institution and the duration of study. Both the private and public sectors offer these courses. In addition, OHNs have the opportunity to complete master's and doctoral degrees in occupational health nursing. What is still lacking is distance-based training for candidates working or living in areas not served by a tertiary education institution (Coetzee & Michell, 2011).

In-service training is important, but fails to cover certain areas or hazards which do not occur in particular workplaces. OHNs should be encouraged to belong to their professional societies, e.g. the South African Society of Occupational Health Nursing Practitioners (SASOHN), and to attend scheduled meetings on a regular basis. Contact with colleagues helps to prevent an insular outlook and provides professional stimulation. This serves as in-service training of the latest trends and developments in occupational health nursing. For a similar reason, OHNs should attend refresher courses from time to time to keep up to date with legal and other related changes (Rapas, 2012).

Professional development of the OHN consists of planned learning experiences designed by or in collaboration with individuals who have the intention of advancing knowledge and skills to be used in their employment (Guidotti, 2011). The

OHN will increasingly require the skills and knowledge to base care on best evidence, to use critical thinking and demonstrate advanced leadership and decision-making skills to develop and enhance services in a more complex and diverse occupational healthcare environment (Casey & Clark, 2009).

### 1.1. Problem statement

The researcher attends the SASOHN meetings in her region on a monthly basis. After observing discussions of the OHNs in these meetings, she realised that there is a common theme in their discussions. As in the occupational health setting, the OHNs mostly work independently, but require expertise in many disciplines to ensure safe and healthy working conditions. After observing these OHNs, she decided to use the following case study to explain their main problem:

Nurse X works full time at a company as an OHN. She is responsible for 1200 employees. She is the only OHN employed with an occupational health medical practitioner (OHMP) visiting the clinic only once a week for an hour. Some of her main functions are conducting pre-placement medicals and annual medicals on all employees, replacing first aid equipment, conducting health risk assessments (taking about two months to complete), attending meetings at least on a daily basis, writing reports, filing documents and training employees on risks. Nurse X has extended her working hours to conduct all her functions. She takes work home to complete the reports. She says that the workload is overwhelming and that she does not have enough time to do what is expected of her. She does not have time to attend SASOHN development sessions or any other training and development sessions. She does not know what the latest legislation, trends or changes in occupational health nursing are. She feels unsure about her role as she is not developed in her field as an OHN and experiences the need for further development.

Increasingly, OHNs will need to acquire and develop the skills and attributes required to deal with a range of new and emerging occupational health nursing responsibilities, as this field of nursing becomes more diverse. There will be greater requirements to review existing learning needs and to plan future professional development. At present the South African Nursing Council (SANC) also works on a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) strategy and it will become a requirement from SANC to maintain OHN registration.

This led the researcher to ask the following question:

What are the needs of the OHN working in the occupational health setting in relation to professional development?

### 1.2. Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of this study was to identify the needs for professional development of the OHN in the occupational health setting.

The objective of this study was as follows:

*To explore and describe the needs of the OHNs in relation to their professional development.*

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