



## Clinical placements in Australian general practice: (Part 1) the experiences of pre-registration nursing students



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### ABSTRACT

An international shift towards strengthening primary care services has stimulated the growth of nursing in general (family) practice. As learning in the clinical setting comprises a core component of pre-registration nursing education, it is logical that clinical placement opportunities would follow the workforce growth in this setting. Beyond simply offering placements in relevant clinical areas, it is vital to ensure high quality learning experiences that meet the educational needs of pre-registration nurses. Part 1 of a two part series reports on the qualitative study of a mixed methods project. Fifteen pre-registration nursing students participated in semi-structured interviews following a clinical placement in an Australian general practice. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and underwent a process of thematic analysis. Findings are presented in the following four themes; (1) Knowledge of the practice nurse role: *I had very limited understanding*, (2) Quality of the learning experience: *It was a fantastic placement*, (3) Support, belonging and mutual respect: *I really felt part of the team*, (4) Employment prospects: *I would really, really love to go to a general practice but ..... General practice placements exposed students to a diverse range of clinical skills which would equip them for future employment in primary care. Exposure to nursing in general practice also stimulated students to consider a future career in this clinical setting.*

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### Introduction

An ageing population, the de-institutionalisation of mental health and the early discharge from tertiary hospitals have increased the number of high acuity patients managed in the community (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2010); Happell, 1999). Despite clear evidence that a strong primary care system improves health outcomes, the growing burden of chronic and complex illness treated in the community has exacerbated the workload of nurses employed in primary care (Department of Health and Ageing (2013); Jolly, 2007). Introducing pre-

registration nurses to this healthcare sector may help sustain and replenish the primary care nursing workforce and equip students with the skills to work in a complex and rapidly changing healthcare environment (Harris et al., 2011; McClimens et al., 2013).

General practices are recognised as one of the largest components of the primary care system and are ideally located within community settings to provide comprehensive, patient centred care to individuals and families across the lifespan (RACGP, 2014). The contemporary environment of general practice now includes various nursing roles to support the traditional work of general practitioners (Halcomb et al., 2007, 2006). Whilst much work has been undertaken exploring the roles of these nurses and their contribution to primary care service delivery, there has been limited attention to the recruitment of beginning nurses to this setting.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) appear to be slow to reflect the shift towards primary care in both the nursing curricula and via clinical placement experiences (Albutt et al., 2013). To date, contemporary studies exploring clinical placements have been largely undertaken in the acute tertiary care sector and do

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not reflect the international shift towards strengthening primary care services (Bjørk et al., 2014). Such trends are not keeping pace with health reforms to build and sustain a strong primary care nursing workforce and threatens the confidence and ability for beginning nurses to work in primary care (Ali et al., 2011; Keleher et al., 2010). Given that clinical placements challenge preconceived ideas of the clinical areas in which pre-registration nursing students wish to practice, it is important to ensure that the placement experience is positive (Henderson et al., 2007; McKenna et al., 2010).

## Background

The clinical environment is a core component of contemporary nursing education. It provides opportunities for pre-registration nurses to transfer theoretical knowledge into practice and has been cited as influencing the student's attitude to learning and future career choices (Happell, 1999; Newton et al., 2009a; Smedley and Morey, 2010). However, as a multi-dimensional and dynamic entity, the clinical environment does not always provide a positive learning experience. Ward culture, the busyness of a unit, and exposure to learning opportunities are each known to influence the clinical placement experience (Andrews et al., 2005; Brown et al., 2011; Levett-Jones et al., 2009).

Different models of supervision found in acute and primary care placements may also influence student learning. In Australia, pre-registration nurses on clinical placements in tertiary hospitals tend to be supervised and assessed by an HEI employed facilitator (Health Workforce Australia, 2010). In contrast, the supervision and assessment of pre-registration nurses on primary care placements is largely the responsibility of the registered nurse employed by the primary care facility (Peters et al., 2013). The pre-registration nurse's perception to supervision by registered nurses working in primary care is not well understood.

The length and timing of clinical experience in the nursing curriculum is a subject of further debate (Betony, 2011; Happell, 2008; Turner et al., 2006). In the United Kingdom (UK) up to 50% of pre-registration nursing education is undertaken in the clinical setting (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2010). The UK Nursing and Midwifery Council further stipulates that pre-registration nurses must complete a three month clinical placement in the final year of their nursing program (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2010). To apply for registration as a nurse in Australia, nursing students must complete 800 h (approximately 20 weeks) clinical placement in various health care settings across their three year baccalaureate degree (Australian Nursing & Midwifery Accreditation Council, 2012). Australian HEIs tend to provide clinical placements in two-week blocks, with a four to five week transition to graduate practice placement in the final year. Given the limited time frame to consolidate clinical skills, it is vital that clinical settings in Australia provide high quality learning environments that support the learning needs of students as they progress through different stages of their nursing program.

To date, the majority of clinical placements in Australia are undertaken in the acute care sector (Health Workforce Australia, 2011). Increased nursing enrolments however, have led to greater competition for available clinical placements. Given the growth of the primary care workforce, HEIs are increasingly looking towards non-traditional, community settings to secure placement opportunities. As more pre-registration nurses are placed in non-traditional settings, it is important to explore their perceptions to these placements. Such an exploration will provide evidence based knowledge around the adequacy of the tertiary preparation for primary care placements and the quality of the placement in terms of supervision and exposure to learning opportunities.

Previous research has explored general practice clinical placements from the perspective of nurses working in general practice (Halcomb et al., 2012; Peters et al., 2013). A mixed methods project was undertaken to now explore this experience from the perspective of pre-registration nurses. A mixed methods approach was chosen as it would allow the researchers to explore different aspects of the learning experience in detail and provide a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon in the Australian context (Creswell, 2014). Whilst qualitative and quantitative data sets are unique, they are complementary and have the potential to contribute to enhancing the clinical experience for pre-registration nursing students. It was considered that the volume of data extrapolated from this mixed methods project was excessive for one publication. Therefore, Part 1 describes the qualitative study of this mixed methods project and a separate paper (Part 2) reports on the quantitative study (McInnes et al., 2015).

## Methods

### Research design

A concurrent mixed methods approach was adopted to explore pre-registration clinical placements in Australian general practices. Qualitative (interview) data and quantitative (survey) data were collected at approximately the same time and assigned equal weighting and priority. Data were analysed separately before being integrated during the interpretation. The qualitative study employed in this mixed methods project explored the narrative accounts of fifteen pre-registration nurses following a two-week clinical placement in an Australian general practice. A qualitative approach allowed the researchers to explore various aspects of the learning experience in detail.

### Recruitment and data collection

Participants were recruited from a single campus of an Australian university offering a range of master of nursing programs which led to initial registration as a nurse. Five participants were enrolled into a four year combined degree/master of nursing program. The remaining ten participants had a previous baccalaureate degree, usually in an unrelated field and were enrolled in a two year graduate entry/master of nursing program. The clinical placement team identified students who were scheduled for a clinical placement in general practice and sent them information about the study. Interested students were then contacted by the first author, provided with additional information about the study and a consent form. A mutually convenient time was arranged to conduct the interview. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions relating to their experience of a general practice clinical placement (Fig. 1). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interviews continued until data saturation was achieved, that is, when verbal accounts of the placement experience became repetitive and no new information was forthcoming (Francis et al., 2010; Polit and Beck, 2014). Data saturation was thought to have occurred after 13 interviews, a further 2 interviews confirmed that no new data was being revealed.

### Data analysis

Qualitative data underwent a process of thematic analysis using the techniques recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). To ensure accuracy and context of the data the researchers read and re-read transcriptions whilst listening to audio

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