



The experiences of student nurses on placements with practice nurses: A pilot study



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ABSTRACT

To prepare the registered nurse of tomorrow in the United Kingdom (UK) to care for patients in general practice (GP)-led services, today's student nurses need to have the opportunity to experience placements with practice nurses to enable them to make positive career choices to become practice nurses in the future. The role of the practice nurse is described in the article. As a pilot project, seventeen students undertook placements with practice nurses in one of seven GP practices selected by the London GP Deanery and the university as having fulfilled the criteria to support student nurses in placements. A mentorship preparation programme was provided to prepare practice nurses for mentoring these students. An evaluation study was undertaken of this pilot project. Findings showed that students were highly positive about the experience; the majority rated this placement as being as good as or better than previous placement experiences. The evaluation also explored the impact on student learning and the value that the placement had. There was a positive impact on students' knowledge and skills in certain clinical areas especially related to health promotion. Students also indicated that they would like to have additional placements with practice nurses and would consider a career as a practice nurse in the future.

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Introduction

With the introduction of clinically-led commissioning of health-care services in the UK, the redesign of service delivery towards more care in the community and the drive to reform primary and community services in order to deliver patient-centred and population-focussed health care it is imperative that the next generation of nurses are being prepared to practice in new ways to meet this workforce need. These changes are not unique to the UK and have taken place in other countries, e.g., Canada (Thorlby, 2011), and in Germany (Chambers et al., 2010). Managing patients with long-term conditions closer to the patient's home in a proactive way will be central to this new way of working and will involve delivering an increased proportion of care for patients with long-term conditions in multi-professional primary care teams where the role of the practice nurse is paramount. To prepare the registered nurse of tomorrow to care for patients in practice nursing in GP-led services, today's student nurses need to have the opportunity to experience placements with practice nurses in GP

surgeries to enable them to make positive career choices to become practice nurses in the future.

This article presents the outcomes of a pilot project that was undertaken in one university in London in collaboration with several GP practices local to that university. This collaboration involved student nurses from one cohort at the university undertaking placements with practice nurses where the GP employs practice nurses.

The context of clinical placements for student nurses with practice nurses

In the United Kingdom (UK) student nurses undertake 2300 h of practice placement experience during their undergraduate programme (NMC, 2010). Similar statutory requirements exist for nursing education in other countries, e.g. Nursing Council of NZ (2010). This practice experience is matched by another 2300 h of theory experience. Both practice and theory experiences are an integrated one according to the students' chosen field of practice/intended area of employment at the end of their course of study.

Clinical placements are pivotal to the pre-registration nursing education. Successful placement learning in the UK requires universities to work in partnership with National Health Service (NHS)

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Trusts and with the independent sector. Similar partnerships for student nurse placements are forged in countries around the world (e.g., Peters et al., 2013; Grealish and Smale, 2011). It has been suggested that the clinical learning environment is the most important resource for developing competence in student nursing (Henderson et al., 2012; Kelly, 2007; Murray and Williamson, 2009).

Because of its practice focus, certain aspects of nursing education need to be experienced in real life. Placement learning opportunities are the only way that experience can be contextualised (Murray and Williamson, 2009). The importance of high-quality practice learning opportunities is well-documented nationally and internationally in the UK (e.g., Quality Assurance Agency, 2001), in Canada (e.g., Reimer Kirkham et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2010) and in New Zealand (e.g., Betony and Yarwood, 2013).

However, globally the issue of capacity with regard to practice placements for student nurses is also becoming more acute as student numbers increase and number of practice areas for placement learning decreases (Edwards et al., 2004; Hall, 2006; Reimer Kirkham et al., 2007; Barnett et al., 2011). In addition to the decreased availability of traditional hospital-based placements, there are major policy changes taking place globally to move healthcare provision into the community. It is imperative that student nurses experience placement learning opportunities in a range of community-based settings (Edwards et al., 2004; Peters et al., 2013). Offering students non-traditional placements with practice nurses in GP surgeries is one way that many countries have been addressing this issue including Australia (e.g., Peters et al., 2013), Canada (e.g., Reimer Kirkham et al., 2007), and New Zealand (e.g., Betony and Yarwood, 2013; Pullon and Lum, 2008). Placements with practice nurses in GP surgeries has the potential to address issues such as diminishing number of traditional placement areas and the policy move towards more healthcare being provided in the community.

In the UK, practice placements in community healthcare settings have traditionally been available to student nurses through working alongside district nurses, who provide nursing care for people in their homes, and health visitors, who provide a public health role that includes delivering child and family health services (from pregnancy to aged 5), providing ongoing health services for vulnerable children and families and contributing to services related to safeguarding children.

Universities are now beginning to forge partnerships with GPs as potential places for students to experience working alongside their practice nurses. GP practices have accumulated years of knowledge and experience in carrying out community-based healthcare. Despite this, clinical placements within current nursing education programmes remain largely hospital-based and focused which has led to problems recruiting high quality practice nurses by GPs. A similar problem exists in medical education where in the UK placement of medical students with GPs normally is 4–6 week placements in years 4 and 5 of medical education programmes. GPs receive funding for medical student placements with them.

There are a number of issues that provide challenges for student nurse placements with practice nurses in GP surgeries. One is the issue of funding. At the time of the project being presented in this article, GPs receive no funding for student nurse placements with practice nurses. Additionally, there is a need to ensure that the practice nurse provides a good learning environment, that there is appropriate mentorship for students and there are strong communication and support links between the university, the practice nurses and GPs. All of these are addressed in the study presented later in this article.

In the UK practice nurses are an ageing group. One survey from the Royal College of Nursing in the UK reported that in one region of

England, 61% of practice nurses will be retiring in the next 5 years (RCN, 2015). Providing placements for student nurses to work alongside practice nurses in GP surgeries may be one way of attracting new nurses into practice nursing.

In the UK, community placements for student nurses traditionally have been undertaken through attachments to district/community nurses and health visitors, rather than to practice nurses in GP surgeries. Although placements with practice nurses is primarily to learn the work of the practice nurse, placements in GP surgeries enable students to work alongside a range of other health care professionals based in surgeries. Depending upon the size of the GP practice, a range of professionals might support student learning in a GP surgery. Table 1 summarises the roles of professionals who students might work with during placements with practice nurses in a GP surgery and outlines, in particular, the role of the practice nurse.

Delivering placements with practice nurses for nursing students is limited, too, by the need to resource these placements financially. As stated earlier, GP practices receive a payment for providing placement experiences for medical students and trainee GPs. Up until 2013, The London GP Deanery was responsible for the educational governance of all approved GP Training, including the funding for medical student placements with GPs. At the time of the study presented in this article the London GP Deanery had an existing network of GP training practices which were accredited to train GPs, and which offered inter-professional learning environments. These GP practices had both the capacity and capability for student nurses to undertake clinical placements with practice nurses. Funding was made available by the then NHS London in 2012 for two pilot projects. The first was to provide a post-registration practice nurse programme, including placement experiences in GP surgeries, for trained nurses currently working in acute nursing. The aim was that on successful completion, these nurses would take up posts as practice nurses. The second pilot project was for student nurses from one university to undertake placements with practice nurses in GP surgeries as part of their pre-registration programme. The aim was for these student nurses to have experience working alongside practice nurses so that they could experience and learn from the work of a practice nurse. A steering group was created to oversee the implementation and evaluation of the two pilot projects. The steering group met from April 2012 until July 2013 through monthly/two-monthly meetings. The meetings were used to plan the project and the evaluation, and to monitor progress/manage any problems that arose. Table 2 shows the membership of the steering group and its collaborative partners.

This article presents the second of these pilot projects – the placement of student nurses with practice nurses in GP surgeries. The pilot was carried out over a one-year period.

Through the pilot project, each GP surgery selected to provide placements for student nurses with practice nurses in their practices received £7500, funded by the then Strategic Health Authority for London. The funding was used firstly, for practice nurses employed by the GP to establish, in partnership with the university, the learning environment for student nurses. An audit was undertaken to assess the quality of the learning environment provided by each GP practice to ensure that it met the quality standards established by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) of the UK (NMC, 2010). Secondly, the funding provided also recognised the extra work for practice nurses for mentoring student nurses. Mentorship training was also provided to each practice nurse involved in the pilot project. One of the intentions of the pilot project was to make a case for all GP surgery placement areas to receive a placement tariff for all health-related students.

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