



Information literacy during entry to practice: Information-seeking behaviors in student nurses and recent nurse graduates



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SUMMARY

Background: The ability to locate information pertinent to guide clinical practice is important for quality nursing care and patient safety. To date, little is known about the transfer of information literacy skills as student nurses transition to clinical practice as new graduates. This study begins to address this gap from the perspective of student nurses, recent nurse graduates (RNs), nurse leaders and library staff.

Objectives: To describe the information-seeking behaviors of student nurses and RNs within their clinical settings.

Design and Participants: This is a descriptive study that included both cross-sectional surveys and key informant interviews. Participants were senior-level undergraduate students and recently graduated RNs (graduated since 2008), and nurse leaders and library staff employed in one of the clinical sites accepting undergraduate students from the McMaster Mohawk and Conestoga BScN program. The study was completed in two large hospital corporations in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Methods: Student nurses and RNs were invited to complete online surveys to assess their access to and use of information sources and resources within clinical practice. Students completed a survey comprised of five open-ended questions, while RNs completed a survey comprised of 13 fixed choice and open-ended questions. Nurse leaders and library staff participated in qualitative interviews to verify the extent and availability of information resources.

Results: Eighteen RNs and 62 students completed their respective surveys. Three categories of information sources and resources were identified: electronic, print and interpersonal. Electronic sources of information were the most used resource by both students and RNs. More RNs reported using interpersonal sources, while students reported using more print sources of information.

Conclusions: Recent RN graduates meet the Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing performance indicators related to information access for the entry to practice Nursing Informatics competencies.

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Introduction

This pilot study was developed as our undergraduate nursing program undertook a curriculum renewal with a new emphasis on the preparation of students for the transition to becoming a nurse. At that time, the shifting expectations within the entry to practice competencies for new graduate nurses prompted us to explore the information seeking behavior of pre-graduate level students and recently employed new Baccalaureate-prepared Registered Nurse (RN) graduates (BScN-RNs¹). This paper presents the results of our study, which explored access to information sources and resources in the clinical practice setting of pre-graduate level students and recently graduated RNs.

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¹ From this point BScN-RNs will be referred to as RNs when referring to participants in this study.

Background

In 2001, the educational requirements for student nurses changed in much of Canada and required a Baccalaureate degree for entry into practice as an RN (CNA, 2011). In addition to this change, nursing competencies and performance indicators were revised to include nursing informatics (College of Nurses of Ontario, 2009). Specifically, the College of Nurses of Ontario states that RNs “... know how and where to find evidence to support the provision of safe, competent and ethical nursing care” (p.5 & p.31). The Canadian Associations of Schools of Nursing expanded on these competency statements in the development of National Competencies (Nagle et al., 2012). From their review of ten provincial regulators, three informatics competencies were identified for entry-to-practice RNs: information and knowledge management; professional and regulatory accountability; and the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Examining the student and new graduate perspective is important given the changes to the educational requirements and that the

expectations for information literacy and evidence-informed decision-making are now more explicitly stated in the competency statements for Canadian nurses.

Literature

The transition from student to practicing nurse holds many challenges for new graduate nurses. In particular, as RNs, they are expected to engage in evidence-based practice; this requires that nurses locate and appraise current information and make informed decisions as they plan care with and for their patients (College of Nurses of Ontario, 2009). The ability to locate information pertinent to guide clinical practice is important for the provision of safe and quality nursing care for patients. As such, this skill is now included among the competencies required of nurses across a number of different jurisdictions and countries. The Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing includes two competencies related to ICT and evidence-based care within their document outlining RN entry to practice competencies (Nagle et al., 2012): “uses relevant information to support the delivery of evidence informed patient care” (p.10) and “uses ICTs in accordance with professional and regulatory standards and workplace policies” (p.12). The United Kingdom (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2010) and Australia (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2006) have similar competencies within their competency standards for nurses.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) defines information literacy as “the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information” (ACRL, 2010). Specific training is required to become competent and efficient with information literacy skills and can be accomplished in face-to-face or online formats (Durando and Oakley, 2005; Dee and Stanley, 2005). Given that students today are part of the ‘net generation’ in general, and have up to four years of information gathering and appraisal training as part of their successful progression through their undergraduate education program to become an RN, one might expect new graduate nurses to be experts in information seeking, both in locating and using information in their clinical practice. However, in practice, students tend to focus on their assignment rather than on life-long learning and get information from librarians, faculty and peers rather than using their information literacy skills (Nayda and Rankin, 2008). A small study in two large Canadian Universities demonstrated that providing specific instruction for information literacy skills to nursing students improved confidence and awareness of the scope and array of materials available through online databases (Julien and Boon, 2004). Collectively, these results suggest that on graduation, new graduate nurses may not have competent or efficient information literacy skills and may not transfer their focus from assignments to clinical practice.

Studies conducted with RNs have reported similar results. In the United States, Pravikoff et al. (2005) found that more than 80% of nurses had never used the hospital library nor had been provided with instruction for accessing electronic resources. Although this was a large study, limitations include the low response rate (37%) and that a majority of participants (61%) had graduated prior to 1990 when internet access to library resources was in its infancy. In addition, Campbell and McDowell (2011) assessed self-perceived computer literacy among US nurses, applications included are also relevant to information literacy. Smart phone and personal digital assistant (PDA) use as well as search of bibliographic databases were among the applications with the lowest perceived skill levels reported by nurses in this study. The authors also found that computer literacy increased with nurse year of birth (i.e., younger age). Studies of information literacy among nurses in Canada found that nurses report constraints to getting information, such as limited time, inadequate skills in appraising literature and no access to online information in practice settings (Estabrooks et al., 2003; Penz and Bassendowski, 2006; Secco et al., 2006). Nurses may lag behind other groups in use of the internet for access to information in the workplace (Estabrooks et al., 2003). At that time, Estabrooks et al.

(2003) viewed information from the internet as static; however, the data collection period for this study was from 1996 to 1998, which is a significant limitation as much has changed in informatics and technologies since then. More recently, Hart (2008) conducted a systematic review examining information competency among US nurses. The author concluded that US nurses do not have the required information literacy skills or knowledge to obtain information necessary for evidence-based practice. However, recent nurse graduates were specifically excluded in this review. To our knowledge, no studies have been conducted examining information literacy skills among new and/or recent nursing graduates.

The transition from being a nursing student to a practicing RN involves several major factors related to changes in professional responsibility and accountability for safe and effective patient care. In their synthesis of the literature, Ferguson and Day (2007) suggest that new graduate nurses begin to make sense of their clinical world as a practicing RN at approximately six months, and begin to apply evidence-based practice as they master their clinical work. This synthesis focused primarily on evidence-based practice, professional judgment and the structure of the clinical setting; information literacy was not part of this study.

Nurses report using a wide array of sources and resources of information; most often including patient information, personal experience in nursing, information from attending in-services, information learnt in nursing school, discussions with physicians, information from fellow nurses, and intuition (Estabrooks et al., 2005; McGowan et al., 2009; McKnight, 2006). These results are supported by an American study comparing the information literacy of nurses and nursing students (Dee and Stanley, 2005). They found that both nurses and nursing students were most likely to rely on colleagues and books for medical information; other sources identified by participants included PDAs, e-journals, ebooks. The authors also noted that students were more likely to use online databases than were nurses. Of note, neither group “made full use of the clinical information resources available to them” (p.220), and many were not aware of the library. Nursing students differed from nurses as their reported use of resources was based on accessibility and awareness; in contrast, nurses reported fewer available resources and reported accessing information from people closer on-hand. Similarly, differences in information seeking of staff nurses compared to students were reported; staff nurses were said to favor less formal and more interpersonal sources of information (Estabrooks et al., 2005). They reported that although nurses used multiple sources of information, journals, research papers and media were least favored. These authors also noted that experiential knowledge is not included in most empirical studies. Neither study looked at information literacy skills among new graduate nurses.

In summary, although nurses are expected to practice evidence-based nursing, information sources and resources may not be easily accessible or available in the clinical settings where nurses are working. Consistently, the most valued and accessible resource/source of information noted in the literature is interpersonal; however, the change in the quantity and quality of online resources has and continues to expand rapidly. Presently, little is known about the transfer of student nurses' information literacy skills as they transition into their roles as new graduate nurses working in clinical practice. This pilot study begins to address this gap in the literature and is timely as the Canadian baccalaureate entry-to-practice competencies have been in place for five years.

Methods

Study Design and Participants

This descriptive, two-phase pilot study included both a cross-sectional survey and key informant interviews. Undergraduate nursing students in their final year (students), newly employed recent

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