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Original Research - Qualitative

## Peer to peer mentoring: Outcomes of third-year midwifery students mentoring first-year students

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 15 April 2016

Received in revised form 14 December 2016

Accepted 14 March 2017

Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Midwifery

Education

Students

Peer mentoring

Clinical placements

### ABSTRACT

**Problem:** Undergraduate midwifery students commonly experience anxiety in relation to their first clinical placement.

**Background:** A peer mentoring program for midwifery students was implemented in an urban Australian university. The participants were first-year mentee and third-year mentor students studying a three-year Bachelor degree in midwifery. The program offered peer support to first-year midwifery students who had little or no previous exposure to hospital clinical settings. Mentors received the opportunity to develop mentoring and leadership skills.

**Aim:** The aim was to explore the benefits, if any, of a peer mentoring program for midwifery students.

**Methods:** The peer mentoring program was implemented in 2012. Sixty-three peer mentors and 170 mentees participated over three academic years. Surveys were distributed at the end of each academic year. Quantitative survey data were analysed descriptively and qualitative survey data were analysed thematically using NVivo 10 software.

**Findings:** Over 80% of mentors and mentees felt that the program helped mentees adjust to their midwifery clinical placement. At least 75% of mentors benefited, in developing their communication, mentoring and leadership skills. Three themes emerged from the qualitative data, including 'Receiving start-up advice'; 'Knowing she was there' and 'Wanting more face to face time'.

**Discussion:** There is a paucity of literature on midwifery student peer mentoring. The findings of this program demonstrate the value of peer support for mentees and adds knowledge about the mentor experience for undergraduate midwifery students.

**Conclusion:** The peer mentor program was of benefit to the majority of midwifery students.

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#### Statement of significance

#### Problem or issue

Undergraduate midwifery students experience anxiety in relation to their first clinical placement.

#### What is already known

Student peer mentor programs provide valuable forms of support to mentees that cannot be replicated by staff. The nursing literature has shown that there are additional

benefits to mentors such as building mentoring and leadership skills.

#### What this paper adds

This program shows there are benefits to student peer mentors and mentees in the midwifery context. More than 75% of mentors felt that they benefited by developing their communication, mentoring and leadership skills.

### 1. Introduction

The Bachelor of Midwifery course aims to prepare graduates who will be competent midwives with the skills, knowledge and confidence to practise midwifery according to the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) definition of the role and scope of practice of the midwife and the Australian National Competency

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Standards for the Midwife (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia 2006).

The problem of varying levels of anxiety experienced by first-year Bachelor of Midwifery students, prior to their first clinical placement, was a concern among academics. This problem was identified in two ways. Some students self-reported their anxiety verbally to academics during the semester. Others reported it via the university Student Feedback Survey (SFS) process at the end of the first semester in the first year. This peer mentoring program, where third year students mentored first year students, was implemented in order to reduce the anxiety they experienced and to facilitate a smooth transition to clinical practice.

In an initial review of the literature, only one paper was found that related to a midwifery student peer mentoring program.<sup>3</sup> Due to this, the search was extended to include literature on peer mentoring for nursing students. It was felt this was justified because there were sufficient similarities between the educational pathways of nurses and midwives to warrant adding nursing literature to the search strategy.

A database search of the literature was conducted, using the databases OVID Medline, CINAHL, Interim/Internurse, and PubMed. The search was limited to articles in English from the years 2000 to 2016. The keyword search terms 'Student nurses' OR 'Student midwives' AND 'peer mentor', were used, resulting in 91 hits. After removing duplicates and reviewing abstracts for relevance, eighteen remained, for which full texts were sought. Papers describing student peer mentoring programs that offered academic support only were excluded; as the focus of our program was on supporting students during clinical placement.

Seventeen of the eighteen articles retrieved related to nursing student peer mentoring programs. Only one article, which was from Australia, related to a midwifery student peer mentoring program.<sup>1</sup> However, only mentees were surveyed in this study about their experiences.<sup>3</sup> Our program is, therefore, the first to report a peer mentoring program for midwifery students in which both mentees and mentors were surveyed.

Peer mentoring and peer support programs in nursing schools and universities in a number of countries are reported in the literature, including those from the United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (USA), Taiwan, Canada and Australia. The aims and designs of the various programs are diverse. Some have a purely academic focus; some are restricted to the clinical placement experience only; and many integrate social, academic and clinical peer support. Some are specifically time limited to the clinical placement,<sup>2</sup> whilst others span a semester or year-long process that include the clinical placement as an important component.<sup>3</sup>

It is well documented that clinical placements are stressful for new undergraduate students. One of the problems encountered by students is inadequate supervision on placement due to staff shortages in the clinical environment.<sup>5,6</sup> Midwifery students face additional challenges of recruiting and following pregnant women for their required continuity of care experiences.<sup>1</sup> These challenges include the time-consuming nature of engaging with women in order to recruit them into the program and the pressure of being 'on call' to attend their births. The latter is particularly challenging for students with paid work and/or caring responsibilities in addition to academic and clinical placement commitments.<sup>24</sup> In order to ameliorate this stress, more support is required for students in the clinical practice environment.<sup>2</sup> One solution maybe student peer mentoring programs which enhance the experience of students adapting to the challenges of tertiary level study and university life, across a diverse range of disciplines.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of several peer mentoring programs reported in the literature<sup>3,7,8</sup> was to address and reduce student attrition rates.

Negative experiences on clinical placement were felt to trigger the attrition of first year nursing students.<sup>8</sup> There were no quantitative data demonstrating whether peer mentoring does, in fact, reduce attrition. Several surveys revealed, however, that mentees felt motivated to keep going during challenging times due to the peer support they received.<sup>6</sup> Most mentees found the support offered by the more senior students to be helpful, encouraging, understanding, reassuring and positive.<sup>9,10,11,14</sup> In one study, mentees reported feeling comfortable asking questions of their peer mentors, saying that they felt able to ask them openly for information and advice, especially about clinical placements.<sup>17</sup> This is aligned with the views of academics in the same study which found many questions asked by first-year students are best answered by more senior students, rather than staff.<sup>7</sup>

The grouping of mentors and mentees are structured in a range of ways in the literature. Many of the papers report one mentor working with a group of mentees. The size of the mentee groups vary, from three to eight per mentor,<sup>7,9</sup> matching for gender,<sup>10</sup> age and/or alphabetically.<sup>7</sup> In some programs, however, mentees choose the mentor with whom they most closely identified,<sup>1</sup> a process recommended by students in the evaluations elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> A number of programs paired a senior student with a more junior student<sup>11–13</sup> and another aimed for pairs or trios of students.<sup>2</sup> Three used a buddying system, joining a pair of students together with a staff member.<sup>5,10,11</sup>

A number of benefits from participating in peer mentoring programs were reported in the literature. Students developed their teamwork and collaboration skills,<sup>10,11</sup> with increased interaction between students across year levels was noticed by staff.<sup>9,10</sup> Mentees felt that their mentors were a protective factor against feeling isolated on clinical placement, which built their confidence and reduced communication barriers.<sup>6</sup> Mentors gained confidence from the experience of mentoring a more junior student,<sup>10,11,19</sup> finding that they could appreciate how far they had come since beginning their studies.<sup>9,12,13</sup> Leadership skills were also enhanced through the experience of being involved in the development of another student.<sup>10,12</sup> Mentors reported that the process of organising their role improved their clinical decision making,<sup>11</sup> helped them to develop time management skills<sup>11,19</sup> and assisted them in gaining a more thorough understanding of the role of clinical educator or preceptor.<sup>9,11,19</sup>

Whilst evaluations demonstrated positive feedback and showed student peer mentoring programs to be worthwhile, there were some suggestions for improvement. For example time constraints for students were a barrier to maximising the success of peer mentoring relationships.<sup>12,14</sup> Suggestions were made by students for academics to provide more structured or timetabled, opportunities for students to meet.<sup>9</sup> Where Faculties did provide structured introductory sessions this generally occurred during the orientation or induction period for first-year students<sup>2,5,6,14</sup> and/or included a social event a few weeks into the semester.<sup>7</sup> A few Faculties had social events at the end of the academic year, at which time surveys and awards could be distributed.<sup>2,6</sup> Programs in which these types of events did not occur, received feedback from students that this would have been desirable.<sup>11,12</sup>

Little is known about the value of peer mentor support for undergraduate midwifery students. To our knowledge, only one such program has been reported in the published literature which was also set in Australia.<sup>1</sup> The program involved 55 first year mentees and 21 student peer mentors. However, the views and experiences of the mentors were not surveyed. The 55 mentees who received mentoring responded to surveys that included Likert scale and open questions. Eighty-seven percent responded positively and reported that the program improved their confidence and motivated them to continue their studies during difficult times. Mentors provided reassurance to their mentees by

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