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Australian research investigating the role of nurse practitioners: A view from implementation science

Malcolm Masso, PhD, RN, BSc(Econ), MNA, MPH*,
Cristina Thompson, RN, RM, BA, MBA

Centre for Health Service Development, Australian Health Services Research Institute, University of Wollongong, Australia

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Summary The catalyst for the paper was a rapid review of the literature which identified Australian research on nurse practitioners. This paper reports on those studies investigating individual nurse practitioner roles, framed in terms of the implementation science literature and three stages of implementation: exploration and adoption of the role, initial implementation of the role, and full operation of the role.

Database searching of the peer-reviewed literature was supplemented with searching relevant web sites. Most studies focused on certain aspects of the nurse practitioner role rather than undertaking a comprehensive evaluation. There was no consistency in the way the roles were described, making it difficult to compare what may be similar roles in different studies. The research generally treats the nurse practitioner role as the independent variable, rather than the care provided by the nurse practitioner. The concept of implementation fidelity was absent from all studies, except for one which addressed the issue indirectly. Many studies included little contextual information, making it difficult to judge the role of context in influencing both implementation and patient outcomes and establish plausible links between the activities of the nurse practitioners and patient outcomes.

Based on the findings, a checklist is recommended for use in future studies which would enhance the ability to make judgements about implementing nurse practitioner models of care; facilitate comparison of similar roles and increase the capacity to make informed decisions about the prospects for wider implementation of nurse practitioner roles or models of care.

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* Corresponding author at: Centre for Health Service Development, Australian Health Services Research Institute, Building 234 (iC Enterprise 1), Innovation Campus, University of Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia. Tel.: +61 02 4221 4411; fax: +61 02 4221 4679.
E-mail address: mmasso@uow.edu.au (M. Masso).

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1. Introduction

Serious debate regarding the introduction of the nurse practitioner role in Australia started about 25 years ago. Ten years later, in 2000, the first nurse practitioner was authorised to practice and the following year the first nurse practitioner was appointed to a position. From these humble beginnings, the number of nurse practitioners has steadily increased, as has the volume of Australian research into the nurse practitioner role. Australian research has taken place in the context of research from other countries with a longer history of nurse practitioners, particularly the USA, Canada and the UK (Brown & Grimes, 1995; Carter & Chochinov, 2007; Horrocks, Anderson, & Salisbury, 2002; Jennings, Clifford, Fox, O'Connell, & Gardner, 2015; Newhouse et al., 2011; Wilson, Zwart, Everett, & Kernick, 2009).

The catalyst for this paper was a rapid review of the nurse practitioner literature conducted for the NSW Ministry of Health (Masso & Thompson, 2014), which included identifying all the published Australian research on nurse practitioners up until the review was conducted. The review identified four categories of studies: (1) studies of nurse practitioners in particular clinical settings; (2) studies using surveys, interviews or focus groups to collect cross-sectional data from nurse practitioners; (3) studies using surveys or interviews to collect data to identify the views of others regarding nurse practitioners and (4) studies using work sampling and chart audit to investigate the work of nurse practitioners.

Reflecting on our rapid review, several observations became apparent with regard to the first category of studies (i.e. nurse practitioners in particular clinical settings), including that some studies may have been conducted too early (before a role was fully implemented) or that there was insufficient information to determine whether or not the role was 'fully implemented'. The purpose of this paper is to share those observations and explore how the future reporting of nurse practitioner research might be improved using the 'lens' of implementation science.

There are many references in the literature to the ways in which the roles of nurse practitioners vary across countries, resulting in confusion about how the role is defined (Duffield, Gardner, Chang, & Catling-Paull, 2009; Stasa, Cashin, Buckley, & Donoghue, 2014). For example, some countries use the term 'nurse practitioner', whereas others tend to use the term 'advanced practice nurse' (Pulcini, Jelic, Gul, & Loke, 2010). From the perspective of synthesising the results of multiple studies of the nurse practitioner role across different countries, this suggests that it cannot be assumed that each study is investigating the same thing (i.e. the nurse practitioner).

Despite this, both the Australian research and the broader international literature, is generally underpinned by an implicit assumption that all nurse practitioners are indeed the same. For example, reviews of the literature usually start by 'setting the scene' in terms of current knowledge and development of the role and then describe the methods for searching the literature and culling the results, with the culling typically including consideration of study design or study quality. What is not usually undertaken is some consideration of whether the studies included in the

review have all studied a similar role. An exception is a review which was restricted to studies from the USA because the authors believed that some features of the role (e.g. educational preparation, scope of practice) and the health system were so different from other countries that it would be inappropriate to include studies from outside the USA (Newhouse et al., 2011).

Despite a recent emphasis on understanding what is meant by 'implementation', what influences implementation and how implementation can be evaluated, it is surprising that there is a general lack of clear conceptualisations and definitions of what is meant by the term 'implementation'. Even when the term is defined, it is often difficult to comprehend how well an intervention has been implemented. The two main ways of conceptualising implementation are in terms of stages, a sequential process whereby an intervention (in this example the role of nurse practitioner) is progressively implemented (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005), and in terms of the degree to which an intervention has been implemented, referred to as implementation fidelity (Carroll et al., 2007). If the role of a nurse practitioner is not fully implemented, it is difficult to differentiate between a role that may be very effective, but not fully implemented, and a role that is not effective (Fixsen et al., 2005).

For the purposes of considering Australian research involving nurse practitioners, the following stages of implementation provide a useful way of framing the research:

1. Exploration and adoption of the role – making a decision to adopt an innovative role and developing a plan to implement that role.
2. Initial implementation of the role.
3. Full operation of the role (Fixsen et al., 2005).

These three stages have been used to structure the paper.

2. Methods

The literature searching for the original rapid review was conducted in October 2013, involving database searching of the academic literature from 2000 to 2013, together with searching the web sites of government health departments, professional nursing organisations and universities within Australia running Masters degree programmes for nurse practitioners. Databases searched included Cinahl, Medline, Education Research Complete, ERIC, Health Source: Nursing/Academic edition, Psychology & Behavioural Sciences Collection, Summons and the APN Literature Database maintained by McMaster University. Search terms included 'nurse practitioner', 'Australia', 'model' and 'theory'. A search was also conducted for the author Gardner, given the key contribution to the nurse practitioner literature by the Australian researchers Anne Gardner and Glenn Gardner. The Trove database was searched for Australian theses. Snowball searching consisted of reviewing the reference lists of key studies and using Google Scholar to track citations forward in time.

The searches were re-run in March 2015 to identify additional Australian studies published in the intervening period. In total, 1862 papers were identified from searching the

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