



Undergraduate nursing students' strategies for coping with their first clinical placement: Descriptive survey study



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ABSTRACT

Background: Clinical placement is an essential component in academic nursing programs to provide nursing students with an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge to practice. The first clinical placement can be an extremely stressful experience for some nursing students, which may affect their decision to be a nurse.

Objective: The aim of this study was to identify factors and strategies that enable a positive experience of the first clinical placement for first year nursing students.

Design: Mixed methods descriptive survey design.

Settings: The study was conducted in a nursing school at one university in South Australia.

Respondents: Respondents were all first year undergraduate nursing students at a higher education facility in South Australia.

Methods: Data collection tool was an online questionnaire including quantitative and qualitative questions. Coping strategies framework informed qualitative analysis.

Results: Respondents identified a range of strategies that had enabled them to positively cope with their first clinical placement experience. Strategies included use of debriefing sessions with their clinical lecturers and seeking-out their friends and family to talk about their first clinical placement experiences. Other strategies included being adequately prepared before the clinical placement, identifying and seeking advice from supportive nursing staff and effective communication between nursing schools and clinical institutions about placement arrangements and expectations.

Conclusions: It must not be forgotten how stressful first clinical placements are. This experience will leave a lasting impression on students' introduction to the nursing profession. Sharing coping strategies used by nursing students will assist to provide a positive introduction to nursing practice.

1. Introduction

Clinical placement is an essential component in nursing education that provides nursing students an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge to practice, which cannot be achieved by classroom education alone (Forneris and Peden-McAlpine, 2009; Lamont et al., 2014; Mann et al., 2009; Wallin et al., 2013). As identified by Henderson et al. (2012), clinical placement engages nursing students with the environment of nursing care and educates them about the norms of nursing practice.

The first clinical placement usually starts in the first year of academic nursing programs and subsequent clinical placements continue

until the end of the program. Huggett et al. (2008) considered that an early clinical placement can affect the student perceptions about the nursing profession. Therefore, a negative experience during the first clinical placement may be a critical factor that contributes to nursing students withdrawing from nursing education programs.

A comprehensive review of the literature identified a range of approaches used by nursing schools and clinical institutions to enable first year nursing students to have a positive experience of the first clinical placement. However, the voice of nursing students was absent from the literature. The literature did not include strategies developed by first year nursing students that had assisted them to cope with the first clinical placement.

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This paper elicits the factors that support a positive experience of the first clinical placement for first year nursing students. A number of strategies are highlighted that the nursing students used to help them to positively cope with their first clinical placement experience, thereby adding their experience and knowledge to the nursing literature. Clinical lecturers will find this information useful to provide practical advice and support for students at a critical time of their nursing education.

2. Background

A major issue reported in the literature for nursing students was the experience of anxiety during their first clinical placement (Andrew et al., 2009; Chesser-Smyth and Long, 2013; Christiansen and Bell, 2010; Khalaila, 2014; Levett-Jones et al., 2015; Morley, 2015; Stunden et al., 2015; Thomas and Bhattacharya, 2012; Venkatasalu et al., 2015; Yildiz and Akansel, 2011). A number of causes for this anxiety were outlined. For some nursing students, it was from a lack of self-confidence in their beginning nursing skills and knowledge (Chesser-Smyth and Long, 2013; Christiansen and Bell, 2010; Khalaila, 2014; Stunden et al., 2015); others reported feeling concerned about not meeting expectations of clinical staff (Levett-Jones et al., 2015; Stunden et al., 2015); making mistakes that could affect patient safety (Levett-Jones et al., 2015); anxiety due to the perceived lack of effective communication skills with patients (Yildiz and Akansel, 2011), and attending an unfamiliar and busy work setting for the first time (Christiansen and Bell, 2010).

The literature review also identified that anxiety is not always an absolute negative effect. Anxiety can be used to positively motivate students to improve performance during clinical placement (Fidment, 2012; Stunden et al., 2015). Being aware of feelings of anxiety may enable nursing students to develop essential coping mechanisms that prepare them to manage stressful situations during the first and subsequent clinical placements (Fidment, 2012; Stunden et al., 2015). However, unmanageable levels of anxiety can distract students attention from the required tasks of the clinical placement, to dealing with managing their anxiety (Levett-Jones et al., 2015).

First year nursing students face a range of challenges during their first clinical placement. Challenges reported in the literature include encountering busy, fast paced clinical environments on the students first day (Levett-Jones et al., 2015; Morley, 2015; Watson, 2014). Mirlashari et al. (2017) or emotionally charged environments such as a paediatric oncology ward where the nursing students had to cope with a mixture of emotions of helplessness and sorrow. Other challenges include a lack of empathy and trust of nursing students by other nursing staff. This includes a lack of trust in their clinical competence and knowledge about diseases or treatment procedures (Bland and Ousey, 2012), and critical thinking abilities (Türk et al., 2013). The literature also reported nursing students feelings of ambiguity about their role in the nursing team and a lack of direction about the tasks they were expected to undertake (Andrew et al., 2009).

However, the first clinical placement is not always a negative experience for first year nursing students (Ääri et al., 2008; Andrew et al., 2009; Cooper et al., 2015; Jonsén et al., 2013). In particular, a supportive clinical environment with constructive attitudes of nursing staff towards nursing students, helps to build a positive student experience (Ääri et al., 2008; Cooper et al., 2015; Jonsén et al., 2013). Another factor that influences a positive first clinical placement experience is receiving adequate preparation before starting the clinical placement (Jonsén et al., 2013). This may include offering small group tutorials with nursing students, their clinical mentors and lecturers in order to identify and discuss clinical issues that may arise during their first clinical placement (Ääri et al., 2008).

The types of approaches mentioned above, were suggestions made by nursing schools and clinical institution staff to enable first year nursing students to have a positive experience of their first clinical

placement. However, the literature did not identify strategies developed by first year nursing students themselves to assist them to cope with their first clinical placement.

3. Methods

3.1. Study Design

The study was conducted to answer the question: What are the factors that support a positive experience of the first clinical placement for first year nursing students? The study adopted a mixed-methods descriptive survey design, using an online questionnaire. The aim of adopting descriptive mixed-method design in this study was to integrate quantitative results with qualitative findings in order to strengthen the outcomes of the research.

3.2. Data Gathering Tool

An online questionnaire was used which included both open and closed questions. The questionnaire was developed based on key issues identified in the literature that related to nursing students' experience of their first clinical placement. This questionnaire involved four parts; demographic data (8 items); students' experience of their first clinical placement (3 items); factors that may have influenced the students' experience of their first clinical placement (1 item); and an open-ended question for the students to explain the strategies that they have adopted to help them cope with their first clinical placement experience (1 item). The experience of students' first clinical placement was examined by asking the respondents to rate their anxiety level during their first clinical placement and explains the causes of their anxiety. The anxiety level was measured using a scale consisting of; not anxious, moderately anxious, anxious and extremely anxious.

Validity and reliability of the developed questionnaire was determined by conducting a number of consultations with a clinical lecturer in the participating institution to confirm that the questionnaire complied with the curriculum of first clinical placement and was relevant to the 'real-life' experience of nursing students on clinical placement. The questionnaire was refined through a process of multiple reviews with a statistician from the participating institution. These reviews included creating, finalising the appropriate statistical tests for analysis and re-drafting of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was then pilot tested with 10 nursing students who did not then participate in the main survey. Feedback from the pilot study included comments on timing of completion, language and vocabulary used, flow of the questions and any difficulties found when completing the questionnaire. A minor change to the open-ended question was required. The questionnaire was then developed into an online format. The participant information sheet along with the link to the questionnaire was emailed to the respondents through the University email system.

3.3. Respondents

The study respondents were first year bachelor of nursing students who have completed their first clinical placement at a particular university in South Australia. The exclusion criteria were first year nursing students who have not commenced their first clinical placement prior to or during the data collection period, nursing students who are not in the first year, or nursing students who are enrolled in other universities. The total target sample was ($n = 154$) students, as this was the total number of the first year nursing students in the participated university records who have commenced their first clinical placement during the data collection time.

3.4. Recruitment Process

One of the researchers sought permission from the participating

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