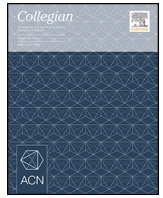




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## A phenomenological exploration of graduate nurse transition to professional practice within a transition to practice program

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 19 January 2017  
Received in revised form 9 September 2017  
Accepted 14 September 2017  
Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Transition to practice  
Graduate nurse  
Nurse transition  
Shock  
Hermeneutic phenomenology

### ABSTRACT

**Aim:** To explore the experiences of graduate nurses enrolled in a transition program, to gain insight into what graduates experienced as beneficial, as barriers and to seek meaning to the phenomena of transition as experienced within a transition program.

**Background:** A graduate nurse's transition to professional practice is a time of high emotion where graduates leave the familiar grounds of university for the unknown of professional practice. Numerous studies, spanning many decades, have investigated issues regarding transition leading to the development of transition programs to aid the recognised burden.

**Method:** The researchers used principles of hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the language used in semi-structured interviews of seven graduate nurses undertaking a Transition to Professional Practice Program in an Australian metropolitan hospital to investigate the lived experiences of transition within a transition program.

**Results:** Thematic analysis of transcribed interviews revealed that transition from student to professional is a time of many new demands that causes shock and can lead to negative emotions. However, many constructive responses and positive emotions were also present. These responses included positive feelings in the care of patients and of support received by graduates from dedicated educators linked to the transition program and by senior nurses on the ward.

**Conclusion:** Transition to practice is an important stage in the career of a Registered Nurse and the transition issues related by graduate nurses in this study corresponded with issues raised in similar transition literature suggesting that continued work is required. However, the benefits of dedicated staff in aiding transition as expressed by the participants of this study is a positive affirmation of the advantages of graduates being enrolled in a transition program.

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### Problem

First identified in 1970, issues with the transition of graduate nurses from education to practice persist to the present day with neophyte nurses being overwhelmed and feeling unprepared by the demands of clinical practice.

### What is already known

From a body of work on the subject, transition programs have emerged to aid the transition to practice. Transition programs offer graduates dedicated support staff, education days and rotation through different clinical environments.

### What this paper adds

This paper explores transitioning within a modern South Australian transition programs from the perspective of people experiencing the phenomena. The experiences of the interviewed graduates suggested that the benefits of the transition program and dedicated staff went beyond actual work support to a perceived 'peace of mind' knowing help was available if needed. The paper also suggests graduates find positive benefits in the care of others.

### 1. Introduction and background

In 1974, Kramer developed the theory 'Reality shock' which posited that university instilled values conflicted with the real-world practice of nursing (Kramer, 1974). In Kramer's (1974, p. 3) work, shock is the 'social, physical and emotional response of a person to the unexpected, unwanted, or undesired' experienced by a graduate in response to the reality of the new responsibilities. The

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work by Kramer established that an issue existed with transition that unfortunately remains true in the modern transition of nurses to practice (Boychuk-Duchscher, 2012).

The concept of 'reality shock' has more recently been conceptualised as transition shock. As described by Boychuk-Duchscher (2009), transition shock represents the initial stage of role adaptation for the graduate nurse, and like Kramer's reality shock, highlights that university teaching does not adequately prepare students for the realities of nurse practice. However, transition shock penetrates beyond the professional aspects of shock and considers the 'intellectual, physical, social, cultural, developmental, spiritual, emotional and economical' (Boychuk-Duchscher, 2012, p. 17). The duration of the graduate adjustment to practice is suggested by Boychuk-Duchscher (2009) as one to four months and is reflective of Rush, Adamack, Gordon, and Janke (2014) graduates who felt a greater need for support in the first one to three months of practice. The 'shock' is attributed to nursing's 'fast pace', which is relatively unforgiving to graduates with an increased responsibility not relatable to the university experience that causes confusion, isolation, anxiety and exhaustion (Boychuk-Duchscher, 2012). Research from Australia supports concepts found in transition shock with graduate nurses relating feelings of being unprepared for the role of a practicing nurse following university preparation with an associated range of negative emotions (Kelly & Ahern, 2009; Levett-Jones & FitzGerald, 2005; Malouf & West, 2011). Similarly, Mellor and Gregoric (2016) interview of graduates from South Australian hospitals related feelings of limited control over the initial stage of their professional role.

A 1984 work by Patricia Benner titled 'From novice to expert' outlined a 5-tier framework of nursing competence that helps to place the graduate nurses scope of practice in context. The second tier of Benner's work titled 'advanced beginner' can be applied to the graduate in that the new nurse can relate to selected clinical situations due to a limited prior experience but that the advanced beginners practice is still procedural in nature (Benner, 1984). The advanced beginner may complete tasks that are unnecessary and miss cues to more immediate concerns (Benner, 1984). For these reasons, Benner (1984) suggests that advanced beginners require support from more experienced practitioners and offers insight into why neophyte practitioners may become overwhelmed in their new role when clinical practice is far from procedural. Support from experienced practitioners can help these advanced beginners develop (Henderson, Ossenberg, & Scott 2015) and theoretically reduce the shock identified by Kramer and Boychuk-Duchscher.

The education of nurses in Australia moved from hospital based training to university based tertiary education during the 1970-80 with the last hospital trained nurse intake occurring in 1990 (El Haddad, Moxham, & Broadbent, 2012; Levett-Jones & FitzGerald 2005; Phillips, Kenny, Esterman, & Smith, 2014). However, questions regarding the clinical readiness of tertiary educated nursing graduates soon surfaced (Levett-Jones & FitzGerald, 2005). From the late 1980's, an organisation level response to issues of the 'theory-practice gap' (Levett-Jones & Fitzgerald, 2005, p. 41) resulted in transition programs to assist with the graduate transition period (Levett-Jones & Fitzgerald 2005; Clare et al., 1996 cited in De Bellis, Longon, & Glover, 2001). However, early transition programs were criticised as inconsistent in format, content and for offering only minimal support for graduates that resulted in a lack of confidence amongst the novice practitioners (Levett-Jones & FitzGerald 2005; De Bellis et al., 2001). Modern programs in Australia employ preceptors, nurse educators, mentors and have education days to increase clinical support, help consolidate skills/knowledge and encourage professional socialisation (Missen, McKenna, & Beachamp 2016; Healy & Howe, 2012; Ostini & Bonner, 2012; Malouf & West, 2011). These added components of the modern transition program help to bridge issues of transition identified

by Kramer and Boychuk-Duchscher and acknowledge the continued need for support identified by Benner. Programs also offer rotation through different clinical areas so graduates gain experiences in a variety of settings (Missen et al., 2016; SA Health, 2016; Healy & Howe, 2012).

Current Transition to Professional Practice Programs (TPPP) in South Australia are run by the Government of South Australia's Health Department and consists of a 12-month program in a public hospital, in either a metropolitan or rural location (SA Health, 2016). Programs offer rotations through medical, surgical or specialty wards and are designed to offer a supportive environment for graduate nurses to consolidate skills, grow confidence and adjust to the new role as a health professional (SA Health, 2016). The TPPP program incorporates theoretical and clinical components (SA Health, 2016) and have dedicated educators and/or support nurses. Extensive Australian research by Phillips, Esterman, and Kenny (2015) suggests that support of new graduates, especially in their commencing weeks, is key to successful transition. However, despite the research transition programs in South Australia are not compulsory and as government program numbers are capped, not all graduates will apply or be successful in receiving an offer (SA Health, 2016).

The transition journey of the graduate nurse from university to the workforce and their development as a professional remains a challenging period of adjustment for graduate nurses (Henderson et al., 2015; Boychuk-Duchscher, 2012). One critique of university education might suggest that graduate be made more 'practice ready' however, as El Haddad et al. (2012) relate, modern nursing has numerous unique and complex settings suggesting preparation for all eventualities is an impossibility. Transition programs exist as another response to assist the graduate nurse in transitioning from student to professional. The importance of the transition program for graduate nurses cannot be understated as Kramer et al. (2013, p. 583) relates '(transition programs are) no longer an option but a necessity'. Though transition programs help the graduate nurse in the adjustment to practice, the programs cannot hope to address all issues, and as noted by Boychuk-Duchscher (2012, p. 15), transition will never 'be uneventful'. The opportunity to further understand this impact was a key motivation for this research, which used the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology to investigate the lived experience of transition, specifically with graduate nurses enrolled in a transition program, from the perspective of a recent graduate of the program (the lead author [MA]). The research provides insight into the transition period by exploring what graduates experienced as beneficial, the barriers they encountered and to provide meaning to their experience of the phenomena of transition.

## 2. Method

The research drew upon the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology as outlined in the writings of Van Manen (1990) to investigate phenomena and give meaning based on how that phenomena is experienced. Specifically, in this study the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology were used to explore and understand the experiences of graduate nurses participating in a transition program. Hermeneutics in phenomenology interprets the languages used by people when describing their experiences of the phenomena of interest (Dowling, 2004). The researchers conceptualise 'transition' as the sum of experiences narrated by graduate nurses during their transformation from student to professional as the phenomena of interest to this study.

The research represented the lead authors' honours research project and as a former participant of the Transition to Professional Practice Program, the lead author had first-hand experience of transition. This link between the lead researcher and participants aided

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