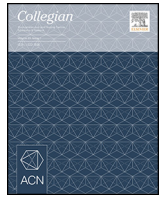




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## Australia's first Transition to Professional Practice in Primary Care Program: Qualitative findings from a mixed-method evaluation

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** In Australia, there is an increasing demand for registered nurses in primary health care. Registered nurses graduating from university typically enter the workforce via supported transition to professional practice programs in acute-care hospital settings. A prospective strategy to create a sustainable primary health care workforce is to develop comparable transition programs in primary health care settings, such as general practice. We developed, implemented, and evaluated Australia's first transition to professional practice in primary care program.

**Aim:** To explore the experiences and perceptions of graduate registered nurses and practice nurses participating in a novel transition to professional practice in primary care program.

**Methods:** Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with graduate registered nurses ( $n=4$ ) and their preceptors (practice nurses,  $n=5$ ) on completion of the program.

**Findings:** Three themes emerged from the graduate registered nurse interviews: *opportunities for education and clinical development, job satisfaction, and career progression opportunities*. Graduate registered nurses were satisfied with the available learning opportunities, indicated a career in primary health care could be potentially rewarding, and anticipated moderate career progression opportunities within general practice. Preceptor themes included *program positivity and early career opportunities*. The preceptors were positive about the program and believed it supported the graduate registered nurses to become confident and competent. However, both the graduate registered nurses and preceptors perceived an acute-care hospital transition to professional practice program was necessary to gain adequate nursing skills, even if they intended to have a future career in primary health care. Furthermore, they appeared to believe that a career in general practice is more appropriate for "older nurses".

**Discussion:** These beliefs may be a barrier for transition to professional practice in primary care programs to develop and support a sustainable primary health care workforce.

**Conclusions:** Improved primary health care transition programs, policy, and educational strategies are required.

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### Summary of relevance

#### Problem

Australia has an increasing demand for a sustainable registered nursing workforce in primary health care. A prospective strategy to meet this demand is to transition graduate registered nurses from university directly into primary health care.

#### What is already known

In Australia, nurses graduating from university typically enter the workforce via transition programs in acute-care hospital settings; comparable transition programs in primary health care settings, such as general practice do not widely exist.

#### What this paper adds

This paper describes graduate registered nurse and preceptor experiences and perceptions of Australia's first transition to professional practice in primary care program.

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## 1. Introduction

As Australia's population ages and complex chronic health conditions increase, there is a demand for primary health care (PHC) to achieve more efficient and effective health outcomes (Health Workforce Australia; HWA, 2012). Registered nurses are important in the delivery of PHC, and a skilled, sustainable nursing workforce is required to meet changing population health care needs (HWA, 2012). However, an ageing nursing workforce is expected to result in a large deficit in the number of employed registered nurses, particularly in PHC (HWA, 2012). One way to address the predicted shortage and develop a sustainable nursing workforce equipped to deliver PHC, is to transition graduate registered nurses directly from university into PHC settings, such as general practice (Bloomfield, Gordon, Williams, & Aggar, 2015). Graduate registered nurses (hereafter referred to as 'graduate nurses') traditionally enter the workforce via transition to professional practice programs in acute-care hospital settings (Murray-Parahi, DiGiacomo, Jackson, & Davidson, 2016).

In Australia, transition to professional practice programs in acute-care hospital settings are not only the most common transition pathway for graduate nurses but are also widely viewed as the preferred entry pathway into the nursing workforce (Levett-Jones & FitzGerald, 2005; Murray-Parahi et al., 2016). There is little research in Australia regarding graduate nurses' attitudes towards a career in PHC and it is our understanding that there is no published research exploring experiences and perceptions of either graduate nurses or PHC nurses towards a transition to professional practice program in general practice settings. Thus, as part of a larger study, semi-structured interviews with graduate nurses and preceptors were conducted at the completion of the first Transition to Professional Practice in Primary Care Program to be implemented in Australia. Data from interviews aimed to inform the future development of similar programs and their wider implementation.

## 2. Literature review

In Australia there is an increasing demand for PHC and for a sustainable and skilled PHC workforce (Fuller et al., 2015). PHC is the current focus of Australian government initiatives to meet these needs (Russell, 2013). PHC is a fundamental component of the Australian healthcare system where the focus of health is directed away from costly acute-care hospital services (Department of Health and Ageing, 2013). Registered nurses are essential to PHC, particularly with respect to health promotion and illness prevention strategies implemented in general practice settings (Consumers Health Forum of Australia et al., 2016). However, registered nurses working in general practice in Australia are also ageing, resulting in limited sustainability of the current PHC nursing workforce (Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association, 2015). Together these factors are anticipated to culminate in a shortage of an estimated 14,770 registered nurses working in PHC by 2025 (HWA, 2012).

Recent government initiatives to increase numbers of registered nurses working in general practice centre on retaining current staff and recruiting nurses from acute-care hospital settings (Russell, 2013). However, despite these initiatives, a deficit in the PHC nursing workforce numbers remains evident (Peters, Halcomb, & McInnes, 2013). It is, therefore, vitally important for the government, health professionals, and academics to address this predicted shortfall (HWA, 2012) through the implementation of innovative PHC workforce development initiatives.

A potential future PHC nursing workforce that has gained little attention until recently is registered nurses graduating from university (Bloomfield et al., 2015). In Australia, graduate nurses are

typically employed directly from university into acute-care hospital settings where they are supported by preceptors during their transition from nursing student to registered health professional (Levett-Jones & FitzGerald, 2005). These transition programs are widely considered necessary for the consolidation of nursing skills and knowledge (Bloomfield et al., 2015) and have been shown to improve confidence, competence, and employment satisfaction in graduate nurses (Haggerty, Holloway, & Wilson, 2013). Graduate transition programs for nurses have existed in Australia for over 25 years and evidence confirms that these are now widely seen by nursing students as an expected entry-route into the profession (Bloomfield et al., 2015). Similar programs for graduate nurses to transition from university directly into PHC settings do not widely exist (Murray-Parahi et al., 2016). Despite the predicted shortage of PHC nurses, there is also currently a paucity of places in acute-care hospital transition programs and limited employment opportunities for graduate nurses (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, 2014). Thus a potential strategy to address both the shortage of transition programs and employment opportunities in acute-care hospital settings, and the growing PHC nursing workforce shortage, is the introduction of transition to professional practice programs for graduate nurses in general practice settings (Gordon et al., 2014).

Concerning, is that PHC settings are not widely promoted as a valid career option and graduate nurses may feel they need to begin their nursing career in the acute-care hospital setting to have opportunities to consolidate clinical skills and exposure to aspects of nursing they do not perceive exist in PHC (Bloomfield et al., 2015). These beliefs are a potential barrier to recruiting graduate nurses to PHC transition programs and limit the capacity of these programs to address the nursing workforce shortage. In order to recruit graduate registered nurses to careers in PHC research into perceptions towards a career in PHC is essential, as is an exploration of nurses' experiences of PHC transition programs.

We developed, implemented, and evaluated Australia's first Transition to Professional Practice in Primary Care Program (hereafter referred to as 'the Program'; Aggar, Bloomfield, Gordon, & Thomas, 2016). The Program was developed in consultation with Northern Sydney Medicare Local (NSML), an Australian government primary health care organisation established to improve access to primary care and support health professionals (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). Graduate nurses were employed full-time for one year in a general practice where they were supported by existing practice nurses (preceptors). The graduate program included training resources, online educational materials, an orientation day, four education days, focused study days, and the facilitation of professional networking opportunities. Preceptor training included a formal structured training program consisting of eight hours of face-to-face education and follow-up consultations in their workplace. Graduates and preceptors were further supported by a dedicated program coordinator. Further information regarding program structure and content is published elsewhere. The pilot program was implemented in 2015 in general practices within NSML. This paper reports the qualitative evaluation of the Program which aimed to investigate the experiences and perceptions of graduates and their preceptors. Importantly, this knowledge will help to inform the ongoing development of future programs and the recruitment of graduate nurses directly into PHC as a means of nursing workforce development.

## 3. Methods

The current study is part of a larger evaluation of the Program which employed an exploratory longitudinal mixed-methods design. In addition to quantitative questionnaires (results pub-

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