

Authors

Nick Nijkamp
 MClinNg, GCTE, BN (Dst.),
 RN, AFHEA, MACN
 Central Queensland University

Associate Professor Dr Pauline Calleja
 PhD, MANP, GCHigherEd,
 BNsc, RN, MACN, FCENA, SFHEA
 Central Queensland University

Dr Ashlyn Sahay
 PhD, BN (Hons.),
 GC Learning & Teaching,
 RN, MACN
 Central Queensland University

Corresponding author

Nick Nijkamp
 MClinNg, GCTE, BN (Dst.),
 RN, AFHEA, MACN
 Central Queensland University

Bridging the gap: Preparing and nurturing novice perioperative nurses

Perioperative nursing is a highly specialised area within the nursing profession that relies on high levels of theoretical knowledge, clinical skill and critical thinking to maintain patient safety before, during and after surgical procedures.

However, attrition rates and the impending retirement of experienced perioperative nurses have created a need to address the transition of novice nurses into this complex and multi-skilled environment.¹ For purposes of this editorial, a novice perioperative nurse is defined as any nurse entering perioperative nursing immediately after graduating or from other nursing backgrounds.

Compounding the issues of attrition and retirement of experienced perioperative nurses is the fact that perioperative nursing is not routinely taught in undergraduate nursing programs, apart from a few students who undertake a perioperative clinical practicum. This leads to a perceived lack of preparedness among new graduates.² In this editorial, we discuss the current challenges facing the perioperative nursing workforce, transition shock experienced by novice nurses and the role of transition programs, as well as making recommendations for future research.

Keywords: education, graduate nurses, novice nurses, orientation, perioperative nursing, transition to practice, transition programs

Perioperative nursing and workforce challenges

Depletion of skilled professionals is a significant challenge faced in perioperative nursing,^{1,3,4} as in the majority of nursing specialisations.

The perioperative nursing workforce plays a crucial role in ensuring safe and efficient surgical care but several factors contribute to workforce shortages in this field. Attrition, driven by factors such as burnout, high-stress levels, and inadequate work-life balance, poses a considerable threat to the perioperative nursing workforce. The demanding nature of the job, long working hours and exposure to critical situations contribute to physical and emotional exhaustion, prompting many nurses to seek alternative career paths.⁵

In addition, the retirement of experienced perioperative nurses coupled with insufficient recruitment to the specialty exacerbates the workforce shortage. As perioperative nurses reach retirement age, a significant number of skilled perioperative nurses are leaving the workforce, creating a gap that is challenging to fill. The loss of their expertise and knowledge further intensifies the strain on the remaining workforce.^{1,3}

The transition into clinical practice is often a daunting experience for novice nurses. In the context of perioperative nursing, this transition is amplified due to the high-pressure, fast-paced and complex nature of the perioperative environment that demands a unique set of skills. Novice nurses may experience transition shock when in the perioperative environment,

characterised by feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and inadequacy.⁶ This shock poses an inherent risk to their own wellbeing and can hinder their ability to provide optimal patient care.

Given the trend of perioperative nursing attrition and the increasing number of retiring experienced nurses, it could be argued that the recruitment of novice nurses is not adequately meeting current workforce demands. Novice nurses entering the perioperative environment lack the necessary knowledge and skills specific to this specialised area,⁷ causing them to experience difficulties in adapting to their new roles. Currently, medical and surgical nursing is taught within undergraduate curriculums; however, education specific to perioperative nursing is not an integral part of the curriculum in most undergraduate nursing programs.^{2,4} This educational gap makes it difficult to attract novice nurses to the perioperative field and potentially results in an increased incidence of transition shock. Furthermore, the lack of perioperative elements within curriculums limits students' exposure to the specialty area, potentially discouraging them from considering it as a viable career option.

Role of transition programs

Transition programs play a vital role in providing perioperative nursing education, supporting cultural integration and managing transition shock; thus, ultimately improving patient safety.⁸⁻¹⁰ These programs are designed to facilitate the smooth transition of novice nurses into the perioperative environment, ensuring they are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to thrive as perioperative nurses.¹¹

By offering specialised education and training in perioperative nursing, transition programs bridge the knowledge gap and enhance the competence of new nurses.¹² Additionally, transition programs provide valuable support for integration into the cultural milieu of the perioperative environment.¹² They help novice nurses adapt to the unique culture, values and dynamics of the perioperative team, fostering effective communication and collaboration.

Within Australian health care organisations, transition programs remain unmonitored and unregulated,¹³ resulting in significant variability among providers. This includes variations in the length of programs; the theoretical and practical content taught; the supervision, mentorship and preceptorship provided, and the qualifications held by educators.¹³ Consequently, it is difficult to establish if any programs are based on best practice and theoretically sound for educating novice nurses.

Adding to this, a large body of literature is available on transition to perioperative nursing practice; however, it lacks empirical research. To address these concerns, the Australian Department of Health report, *Educating the nurse of the future*,¹³ recommends that standardised transition programs be developed, accredited by professional bodies and implemented for all graduate nurses. These programs must be designed according to a best practice framework to create standardisation, but with sufficient flexibility to be tailored to the specific needs of individual novice nurses and the organisations where they are employed.

Within the perioperative specialty, the Australian College of Perioperative Nurses (ACORN) recommends that perioperative nurses have sound knowledge and clinical competence in providing perioperative care.¹⁴ There is a legal obligation for perioperative nurses to ensure they possess the knowledge and skills needed to provide specialised care. ACORN recommends that this is achieved through a perioperative-specific educational program that involves both theoretical and clinical components.¹⁴ However, this raises the question: Is there sufficient empirical research to develop such a program?

Conclusion: Investing in the future of perioperative nursing

The transition from novice to proficient perioperative nurse is a challenging journey, but it is one that can be facilitated through well-designed transition programs. These programs should be theoretically sound and grounded in a best practice framework. By enhancing undergraduate nursing curricula, offering comprehensive perioperative nursing education and implementing structured transition programs, we can cultivate the next generation of confident and competent perioperative nurses. Ultimately, investing in the education and support of novice perioperative nurses not only benefits the nurses themselves but also has far-reaching implications for health care organisations, delivery of quality care and overall patient safety. Further empirical research needs to be undertaken to establish the best practices for perioperative transition programs. In turn, this would support the development of theoretically sound transition programs to support novice perioperative nurses.

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