

Who are nurse preceptors?

A profile of nurse preceptors in Southern Alberta

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Recruiting and retaining registered nurse (RN) preceptors continues to be a challenge in nursing education.^{1,2} Online supports and resources to meet the needs identified by nurses and students in Alberta are now available at cpep-net.ca and a specialized curriculum is under development thanks to a collaborative of nursing organizations. CPEPnet, the network developed by the Central Preceptorship Enhancement Project (CPEP), serves as an educational and workplace initiative involving three health regions, seven academic institutions, professional regulating bodies (CARNA and CLPNA), a union (United Nurses of Alberta), and a specialty organization (Canadian Council of Cardiovascular Nursing).

The Southern Alberta CPEPnet collaborative commenced in 2005, led by the Faculty of Nursing, University of Calgary with the purpose of enhancing clinical capacity by focusing on two aspects of preceptorship:

- 1) recruiting and retaining preceptors through professional development
- 2) increasing student support in clinical placements

Two studies have been conducted to explore the characteristics of preceptors, recruitment strategies and support mechanisms for preceptors. The goal of this article is twofold: primarily to present a profile of RN preceptors in Southern Alberta, and secondly, to promote the Centralized Preceptor Education Project (CPEPnet) as one way of formalizing a network between organizations and establishing educational support.

The Research

The first research project was funded by a University of Calgary starter grant and focused on RN preceptors in the Calgary Health Region. The second research project was funded by Alberta Health and Wellness and focused on the recruitment, retention and supports offered to registered nurse and licensed practical nurse preceptors in the Southern Alberta health regions of Chinook and Palliser. Research was conducted in the form of descriptive surveys and qualitative focus groups

and the findings were collated separately for RN and licensed practical nurses (LPNs) groups. In Calgary Health, descriptive surveys were mailed to 542 RN preceptors and we received 105 responses for a response rate of 46 percent. In Chinook and Palliser, surveys were mailed to 227 RNs and LPNs and we received responses from 48 RNs and 57 LPNs for a response rate of 43 per cent. From these responses, we developed profiles of RN preceptors describing education, experience and positions of the nurse as well as the selection, recruitment and preparation for this role. Qualitative questions enabled further elaboration on some characteristics.

Education

Figures 1a and 1b describe RN preceptors in Southern Alberta in terms of their nursing education. Differences, particularly between the percentage of graduates from a college program and from a university program, may be understood as important in influencing the direction and mode of educational support provided to each group.

FIGURES 1a AND 1b:

Nursing Education Background of RN Respondents

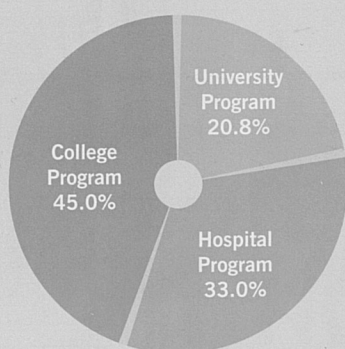


FIGURE 1a
Chinook and Palliser Health Regions

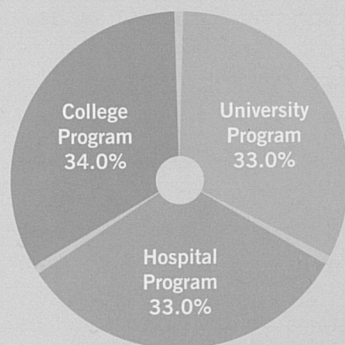


FIGURE 1b
Calgary Health Region

Experience of RN Preceptors

Figures 2 and 3 describe RN preceptors in Southern Alberta in terms of their years of nursing experience. Note the significant difference between Figure 2 for Chinook and Palliser and Figure 3 for Calgary, which identified a bimodal histogram. The preceptors in Chinook and Palliser identified a greater proportion of nurses with 22 to 34 years of experience relative to Calgary. The analysis of RN preceptors in the Calgary identified a significant number of RN preceptors with two to four years experience and again at 30 to 32 years experience.

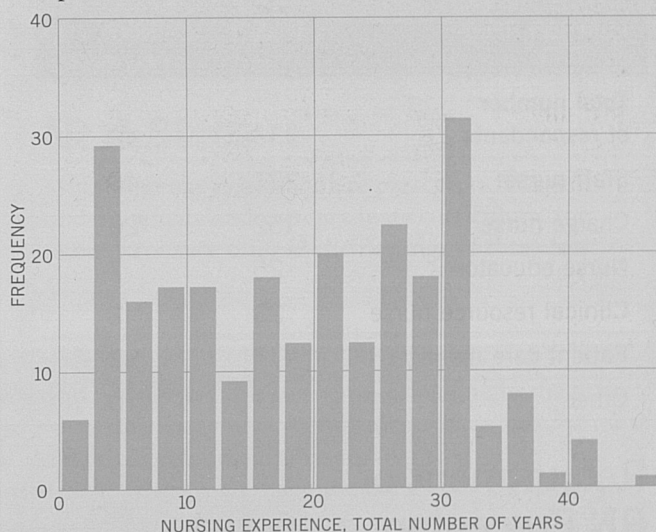


FIGURE 2:
RN Preceptor Years of Experience
Chinook and Palliser

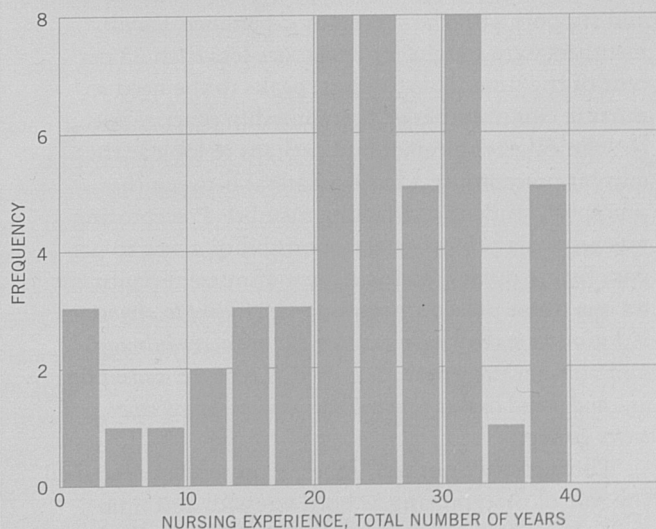


FIGURE 3:
RN Preceptor Years of Experience Calgary

Positions and Roles of RN Preceptors

While the current position held by the majority of preceptors was identified as staff nurse, the analysis of past positions identified vast experience in leadership and education roles, including roles as charge nurse, nurse educator, clinical resource nurse and patient care manager throughout the health regions (TABLE 1). The choice to identify past positions enabled an expansion on the expertise offered by the preceptor to the student.

TABLE 1:
Positions held by preceptors in Southern Alberta

POSITION HELD	CALGARY	CHINOOK AND PALLISER
Total number of respondents	233	48
Staff nurse	227	45
Charge nurse	152	20
Nurse educator	25	7
Clinical resource nurse	23	2
Patient care manager	17	2
Other	42	0

Recruitment of RN Preceptors

Preceptors identified that they were often recruited by patient care managers to take on this role, however they most often sought out colleagues for assistance and support with the preceptor experience. Faculty members were sought for assistance less than 25 per cent of the time. This finding speaks to the need to nurture communities of preceptorship practice within the clinical environment and perhaps re-look at the current preceptor triad as equilateral between the preceptor, student and faculty member. Preceptoring was seen as a professional responsibility, a way to prepare future nurses, and as a form of nurse recruitment. As one nurse preceptor responded: *"I want to almost sell it. I want to make it seem exciting but not overwhelming"* and another preceptor identified *"I hope the student fits in... and likes... so that s/he will stay and we know what we're getting."*

Throughout Southern Alberta, preceptors described the role of preceptoring as both stressful and time-consuming. Preceptors described how they worked outside of work hours to prepare and enhance student

Sixty-nine per cent of preceptors stated they felt unprepared for their role as a preceptor.

success. They experienced an increase in workload, especially during the first part of the practicum, while their patient care responsibilities most often remained the same and sometimes increased. The experience described by RN preceptors in Southern Alberta is consistent with research conducted by Myrick and Yonge¹ and Yonge and her colleagues.^{2,3}

Although most preceptors in Calgary Health identified that they had attended a one-day workshop within the last three years as preparation for the role, 69 per cent of preceptors stated they felt unprepared

Preceptor of the Month

The Central Preceptorship Enhancement Project plans to spotlight one of our own by having a 'Preceptor of the Month' section on its website. If you know of a preceptor that you would like to nominate for this section, please complete the nomination form at www.cpep-net.ca.

for their role as a preceptor. In Chinook and Palliser, 67 per cent of respondents identified that they had not attended workshops and 76 per cent identified that they had not taken any courses to support them in this role. A significant percentage of preceptors in these regions (80 per cent) also identified they felt unprepared for this role. Preceptors identified they were not prepared to assess and evaluate the competence of student nurses.

Implications for Practice

The final preceptored practicum is an essential and mandatory component of all nursing programs leading to entry to practice within Alberta.^{4,5,6} Nursing students in their final clinical practicum need to demonstrate competent professional practice in often complex clinical situations. This requires the integration of theoretical and practical knowledge.^{7,8} The role of the RN preceptor is key to facilitating the application of theoretical knowledge in practice and evaluating the student's ability to enter the profes-

sion as an accountable, responsible, safe, ethical and competent newly registered nurse.

RN preceptors are most commonly committed, enthusiastic and competent clinical experts who have been selected by their colleagues and managers to 'teach' students in practice, because they are good in practice. However, the 'extra' teaching skills and expertise these nurses acquire as they learn to preceptor students is often overlooked. One preceptor commented that preceptoring is about "*guiding, helping students into a job that can be difficult and hoping that we can prevent students from making mistakes while they learn from their experiences.*" Although institutional workshops support and enable a basic understanding of the complexities of this role, preceptors clearly identify that they require continued support and educational extension to sustain and legitimize this role as career advancement.

Next Steps

Mindful of the essential place preceptors have within undergraduate and even graduate curriculum, the researchers have utilized the findings of these two



**Eva
McLennan**

I had the most amazing preceptor!

Erma was her name and she worked at the Cross Cancer Institute, Edmonton in 1986. The night before my preceptorship was to begin, I received a phone call telling me that my best friend had been killed in a motor vehicle accident. I was devastated. Now I was no longer terrified about what my day would bring tomorrow... the first day of my practicum... I was just trying to figure out how I would pull myself together to show up. I did show up... put on a happy face... and was determined to get through the day the best way I could. It worked too... until Erma came up to me, just before morning report with a big smile on her face, introduced herself, and asked me how I was. I burst into tears... told her about my friend... and then asked her to give me a minute to pull myself together. She did better than that. She gave me a hug, and sent me home, telling me that I needed to look after myself now and we would work out the rest in

a few days when I was able to return. Erma taught me many things over the next several months, but what stuck the most was the compassion... the understanding that each person encountered, whether a patient, family member, or preceptor, comes with life experiences. Those experiences impact how we interact with each other.

Many years later, having nursed in a variety of places throughout Alberta and the Northwest Territories, I settled in Lethbridge and embarked on a road that has become my professional passion... pediatric nursing. I have had the privilege of being a preceptor to six nursing students over the past several years and have learned as much from them as they, hopefully, have learned from me. I know that nursing students are the future of our profession. Working side by side, guiding them in the practical application of theory learned, encouraging them to strive for professional excellence, means that I will have caring, competent and capable hands to work beside me in the years to come. I have high expectations of students I work with... any one of them will tell you that... our patients deserve no less. However, I have high expectations of myself, too. Together we work as a team, teaching each other, learning from each other, and ultimately enhancing our nursing practice for years to come.

Eva lives in Lethbridge with her husband, and two children. She has worked at the Lethbridge Regional Hospital, Pediatrics Unit, for the past 14 years. She is a graduate of the Grant MacEwan College nursing program, class of 1986.

The role of the RN preceptor is key to facilitating the application of theoretical knowledge in practice and evaluating the student's ability to enter the profession as an accountable, responsible, safe, ethical and competent newly registered nurse.

research projects to formalize a network between academia, employment agencies, regulating bodies and specialty organizations and are developing an educational curriculum within the mandate of the Southern Alberta Collaborative of the Centralized Preceptor Education Project (CPEPnet). A website, www.cpep-net.ca, was launched in August 2006 to provide information and resources to preceptors and students. The website is structured in three sections: *Discover, Learn and Engage*.

Through the development of the CPEPnet website, members of this collaborative strive to highlight some of the realities and challenges that preceptors encounter and acknowledge the learning and teaching skills that they acquire while taking on this role. The descriptive survey and our conversations with preceptors highlight the realities of “*learning this role on the job*” – a process that is “*hard work, intentional and most often rewarding*.” In honouring the conversations we have had with preceptors throughout Southern Alberta, we aim to legitimize and support the role of the preceptor by creating a curriculum that is useful, based on first-hand experiences and reflective of some of the preceptor's wisdom that was shared with us.

The senior administrative team of the project offers a special acknowledgement to the contributions and dedication of the steering committee members, who represent each of the organizations and contribute significantly to the outcome of this project. The Research Initiatives in Nursing and Health of the Calgary Health Region also wish to acknowledge and offer thanks to Alberta Health and Wellness for funding this project. We welcome comments, suggestions or any offers of involvement in this project through the CPEPnet website: www.cpep-net.ca. RN

NOTE: CARNA was represented on the steering committee by Marie-Andrée Chassé, Nursing Consultant – Policy and Practice.

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Resource for preceptors and students:
www.cpep-net.ca