



This is the Author's version of the paper published as:

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**Year:-** 2007

**Title:** Clinical teaching model for nursing practice

**Journal** Australian Journal of Rural Health

**Volume:** 15

**Pages:** pp 218-219

**ISSN:** 1038-5282

**Abstract:** Clinical placements provide opportunities for student nurses to learn experientially. To create a constructive learning environment staff need to be friendly, approachable, available and willing to teach. There must be adequate opportunities for students to develop confidence and competence in clinical skills with a focus on student learning needs rather than service needs of facilities. Anecdotal evidence from second year nursing students regarding placements was that the preceptor model wasn't working in acute nursing practice areas. Thus a trial using a cluster model was undertaken. Student and facilitator feedback was very positive regarding the cluster model. The wards utilised were medical/surgical units in both rural base hospitals and large metropolitan hospitals.

## MODELS IN CLINICAL NURSING PLACEMENT

Clinical placements provide opportunities for student nurses to learn experientially. To create a constructive learning environment staff need to be friendly, approachable, available and willing to teach. There must be adequate opportunities for students to develop confidence and competence in clinical skills with a focus on student learning needs rather than service needs of facilities.

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### Participants, methods and results

The current model utilised is the preceptor model; this involves a student working under the supervision of individual registered nurses (RN's) who are part of the clinical staff. This model was problematic largely due to RN staff shortages and demanding workloads. The students' evaluations led to the trial of a 'cluster' model of eight students, with a clinical teacher who is paid by the university, in each acute nursing area. **The cost to the University of these models is equivalent.**

Evaluation of forty nursing students' perceptions of their clinical placements was conducted using a qualitative survey approach to evaluate the preceptor and the cluster model of student supervision. The students were enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing (BN) course. The students were asked to identify whether they had undertaken a clinical placement that involved supervision in the preceptor or cluster model. They were asked to rate each model with regard to its suitability in providing opportunities to achieve clinical objectives and practise clinical skills, availability of the preceptor or clinical teacher and to comment on the level of support and clinical instruction provided. The survey asked students to state their preference between the models.

Clinical learning can be described as an apprenticeship, incorporating both cognitive and social contexts.<sup>1</sup> This incorporates the acquisition of knowledge and language, nursing skills and problem-solving strategies as well as immersion in the culture of nursing. The capacity of new graduates to adjust to the clinical role is chiefly dependent on the quality of clinical experiences they have had in their undergraduate program. This means that the role of the nurse responsible for supervision of the students in a clinical setting is paramount.<sup>2,3</sup>

Familiarity of the clinical teacher with the clinical environment is identified as being a significant aspect in the success of the placement from the students' perspective. It is much easier for the students to fit into an area and increases confidence if the clinical teacher can assist the students to integrate.<sup>4</sup> Commitment to the teaching role, clinical

competence and credibility, and the capacity to relate theory to practice are valued characteristics of a clinical teacher and essential components to a successful learning experience for students.

Student comments clearly identify the importance of clinical placements in the process of developing competency as an RN. Students want smaller groups to ensure they get greater opportunities to utilise the clinical teacher's skills and knowledge. This reinforces the use of the cluster model where the clinical teacher is working with the students in a ratio of 1:8 or less and allocates patient care to the students. The students are in one clinical area with the clinical teacher, not spread across several wards as often occurs with other models. This increases students' confidence and ability to work as part of a team. The cluster model allows the students to support each other.

### **Comments**

Clinical placements are an integral and defining component of the Bachelor of Nursing course. In view of recruitment and retention issues and the nursing shortage presently being experienced, it is essential that clinical placements offer students the greatest learning opportunities and benefits. The placements need to be educationally sound to prepare students to practice in a challenging and ever changing clinical environment.

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