

Oncology Nurse Internships: A Foundation and Future for Oncology Nursing Practice?

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To meet the demands of hospitalized patients, new graduates must have the knowledge and skills to care for acutely ill patients with complex needs. Schools of nursing must emphasize the foundation of a broad knowledge base to help graduates prepare to work in a variety of clinical settings. Specialized training in areas such as oncology, critical care, pediatrics, and obstetrics is not emphasized at the baccalaureate level.

In contrast to nursing in decades past, assigning new graduates to less severe patients while they are still novices and learning their roles is nearly impossible because less severe cases are no longer admitted to hospitals. Because of those and other challenges, new graduate nurse residency or internship programs have increased in number and popularity in the past decade. The programs are designed to help transition new graduates and provide the specialized training required to work in a medical specialty.

In October 2010, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) published a report on the future of nursing. Developed through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2011), the report identified four key messages.

- In practice, nurses should rely on the full extent of their education and training.
- An improved education system that promotes seamless academic progression will help nurses achieve higher levels of education and training.
- When redesigning health care, nurses should be full partners with physicians and other health professionals.
- Improving information infrastructure and data collection will allow for effective workplace planning and policy making.

These seek to “focus on the critical intersection between the health needs of diverse, changing patient populations

across the lifespan and the actions of the nursing workforce” (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2011). Recommendations to meet these goals include the importance of transition-to-practice residency programs.

A wide variety of internships, residencies, and fellowships are described in the literature and on hospital Web sites. Although programs vary in name, curriculum, format, and timeframe, they all seek to assist new graduates in transitioning to practice. This article will focus on one cancer center’s experience with an oncology nurse internship program (ONIP).

Literature Review

The transition from graduate nurse to professional nurse poses issues and challenges for the new graduate (Keller, Meekins, & Summers, 2006). Lack of experience and organizational skills, new situations, interactions with the interdisciplinary team, large patient workloads, interruptions, reliance on others, and perceived lack of support are some stressors facing new graduates as they begin practice and transition from novice to proficient practitioner (Morrow, 2009). Through examination of the literature (see Table 1), several prevailing themes surface. Nurse residency programs appear to lead to better retention rates as well as increased competencies, confidence, socialization, and satisfaction of new nurses.

Implementation Suggestions

Analysis of the evidence on the efficacy of nurse internship programs shows that the programs appear to play an important role in the development and retention of competent and confident new nurses. Many of the sources cite the use of one hospital, a limited sample size, and lack of evaluation tools as study limitations.

Standardization of program evaluation outcome measures could provide direction for studies in the future. By assessing current program processes and reviewing published findings, program-specific outcomes could be developed to improve specialized care and professional nursing development (Parchen, Castro, Herringa, Ness, & Bevans, 2008). Developing programs to ease the transition of a novice nurse into an institution’s culture will clearly benefit the institution, as well as nursing as a whole, by improved retention and commitment to the organization, and the development of future nurse leaders (Krugman et al., 2006).

Oncology-Specific Internships

Oncology-specific nurse internships have been documented in the literature since the National Cancer Institute (NCI) Intramural Research Program developed an oncology nurse training program in 1985 (Parchen et al., 2008). Oncology-specific programs tend to focus on extended mentoring at the bedside and classroom support related to oncology basics. Forty-one NCI comprehensive cancer centers are located across 25 states (NCI, 2012). Many comprehensive centers have formal nursing internships or residency programs. A review of program Web sites identified that those programs vary in length from six weeks to one year, with a wide variety of curriculum, didactic experience, and mentoring. Programs also vary in expectations related to strict orientation time versus counting the nurse in direct patient-care hours.

Huntsman Cancer Hospital

Huntsman Cancer Hospital (HCH) at the University of Utah implemented an ONIP in July 2007 after a severe nursing