

GUIDELINES FOR SUPPORTING LEARNERS IN THE WORKPLACE

Introduction

Registered nurses¹ (RNs) in all roles, share the responsibility for creating a culture of learning in which learners² are supported in developing and refining the competencies required for the provision of safe,

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competent and ethical care. RNs are often confronted with competing work priorities within the practice environment that leave little time for learners who would benefit from experienced RNs' mentorship and support as they strive to meet their learning needs. There is a need for RNs to work with others to create a moral community³ in which learners feel safe to ask questions and are valued for their contributions to the health-care team.

In any practice setting, the primary responsibility of an RN is to the patient⁴. All RNs involved in supporting learners must place the safety and well-being of the

patient above all other objectives, including fulfilling educational obligations.

These guidelines clarify the responsibilities of RNs in formal educator and preceptor roles, or informal collegial relationships, in supporting learners. They also outline the responsibility of learners to work with experienced RNs so as to ensure patient safety and highlight the need to advocate for practice settings that are supportive of learning experiences and needs.

The NANB *Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses* (2012), stipulate that all RNs are expected to promote a learning environment that supports on-going professional development for competent nursing practice and to share knowledge and expertise with learners. RNs have a duty to uphold the standards of the profession and to conduct themselves in a manner that reflects well on the profession. RNs treat colleagues, including students, in a respectful manner while recognizing the power differentials among those in formal leadership positions, staff and students. RNs are expected to share their knowledge and provide guidance “for the professional development of nursing students, novice nurses and other health-care team members” (*Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses*, 2008, p. 19).

¹ In this document, RN refers to a Registered Nurse (RN) and Nurse Practitioner (NP).

² A learner is defined as a person studying nursing at the baccalaureate, graduate or doctorate level; an RN new to the profession; an experienced RN entering a new practice setting; an RN new to practice in New Brunswick; and students of other health-care professions.

³ Moral Community refers to a workplace where values are made clear and are shared; where these values direct ethical action and where individuals feel safe to be heard (CNA *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses* (2008).

⁴ The term patient may be an individual, a family, a group or a community.

Accountabilities of Registered Nurses Supporting Learners

In supporting learners, an RN is responsible and accountable for sharing nursing knowledge and for maintaining safe, competent and ethical patient care in accordance with nursing standards. The RN working with the learner is not accountable for the learner's actions provided that the RN has fulfilled her/ his responsibilities as outlined by the employer and in the learning agreement, if applicable (e.g. learning plan,

appropriate supervision). However, in accordance with the *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses* (2008), the primary responsibility for the nursing care received by the patient remains that of the primary nurse to whom the patient has been assigned, (e.g. The RN should ensure that the learner is reporting to her on patient status throughout the shift).

Guideline 1: Registered Nurses in the Educator Role

The RN in an educator⁵ role will:

- utilize the best available knowledge and resources, ensuring the curriculum is relevant and aligned with current nursing practice and is evidence-informed;
- be aware of the learner's competencies and practice limitations;
- ensure the learner's assignment is tailored to the goals and objectives of the educational experience;
- maintain and facilitate the acquisition of the knowledge, judgement and skills relevant to the learner's practice experience; and
- be directly involved in the learning process through consultation with the learner, preceptor and other staff in the clinical setting, including the administrator, as required.

Guideline 2: Registered Nurses in the Administrator Role

The RN in an administrator role will:

- identify RNs who are expert or proficient practitioners (Benner, 2001) to act in the preceptor role;
- facilitate communication so the educator, preceptor and learner are aware of the learner's knowledge, skill and judgement and the objectives of the experience;
- use knowledge of organizational behaviour and communication to create an environment in which cooperation, professional growth and mutual respect can flourish;
- assist patients, colleagues, students and others to learn about nursing practice and health care services (CRNBC);
- assess the workload of all RNs whose patients are cared for by learners and make ongoing workload adjustments so that RNs are available to support and communicate with learners; and
- provide resources that support a learning environment.

⁵ The term educator refers to a clinical or staff educator whose role is teaching to patients and other health care professionals; or a nurse who is an educator/faculty member in an educational setting whose

role is teaching nursing and nursing-related topics to learners of health care disciplines.

Guideline 3: Registered Nurses in the Mentor/Preceptor Role

In practice settings, RNs act in formal support roles, such as preceptors⁶, to ensure patient safety and facilitate a learning environment that encourages professional growth, career development and safe, competent and ethical care.

The RN in a preceptor role will:

- understand the learner's level of preparation (knowledge and skill) and the learner's practice limitations;
- understand the objectives of the experience and the supervision requirements;
- determine from the learner the limitations in her/ his knowledge and skills;
- communicate with the learner in an open, respectful and professional manner;
- demonstrate cultural sensitivity, in relation to the diversity of learners;
- recommend and facilitate learning experiences that address the learner's goals;
- clarify the responsibilities the learner will assume and what responsibilities the RN will continue to carry;
- guide the learner to effectively access resources and work within the setting;
- provide coaching and role modeling of standards of nursing practice and employer policies;
- evaluate and provide accurate and timely written and verbal feedback to the learner and the educator/administrator, as appropriate;
- deal with situations involving an unsafe learner by increasing direct supervision and notifying the educator;
- negotiate for the implementation of support systems such as open feedback and routine communication with educators; and
- advocate for support in the development of educational skills for preceptors that include the knowledge to challenge the proficient learner and the ability to address the unsafe learner.

Guideline 4: Learners

The learner will:

- ensure the safety and well-being of the patients in the learning experience;
- recognize her/his knowledge, skill and judgement, limits of practice responsibilities, and supervision requirements;
- contribute to the development of learning objectives for the learning experience;
- understand and clarify her/his role in the provision of care with the educator/preceptor;
- use clear, accurate and effective communication skills in professional interactions;
- identify the need for, and act to obtain supervision;
- be aware of her/his responsibility to notify the educator if she is not achieving learning objectives due to the setting and/or preceptor relationship;
- be accountable for the quality of care she/he provides within the established learning objectives; and
- become familiar with and follow the agency's policies and procedures.

⁶ The term preceptor is defined as a proficient or expert practitioner who enters into a one-to-one relationship with a learner for a set

period of time to provide on-site supervision along with clinical teaching.

Strategies for Supporting a Culture for Learning

RNs and learners are best able to provide safe, competent and ethical care when they are in an environment that supports quality nursing practice. Quality practice settings support and facilitate learning opportunities by:

- fostering positive clinical placement relationships with educational facilities;
- ensuring that clinical placement agreements articulate current, applicable responsibilities;
- considering workload and staff scheduling that addresses the transitional needs of RN learners (e.g., they need sufficient time to discuss and plan care with colleagues and those patients receiving care; they benefit from matching new RNs with experienced ones);
- promoting an environment that encourages learners to pose questions, engage in reflective practice and ask for assistance without being criticized;
- engaging educational institutions to foster teaching-learning relationships;
- providing professional development opportunities for preceptors;
- providing access to resources;
- formally recognizing preceptors for their contribution to learners, (i.e. thank-you card, recognition in the staff newsletter, or a formal letter for the preceptor's personnel file); and
- working with the educational faculty to ensure appropriate placements, including the evaluation of placements;

Entry-Level Registered Nurse Practice

While a supportive practice environment is an essential component to the practice of all RNs, it is a critical component that encourages entry-level RNs to feel welcome, safe, and valued. Professional development of competence to provide nursing care in situations of increased complexity is reached through experienced

RNs sharing their knowledge, mentoring, guiding, and providing feedback to the entry-level RN.

The RN employer can help the entry-level RN adjust to work life as an employee, by ensuring an experienced RN is willing to act as a mentor (i.e. a designated RN who is willing to answer questions and provide guidance as requested throughout the shift). It is unrealistic to expect entry-level RNs to function at the level of practice of an experienced RN. However, with guidance the entry-level RN will consolidate knowledge and experience to increase her/his nursing abilities to provide proficient and competent care, therefore, becoming an asset to the healthcare team.

LEARNING OCCURS WHEN NURSES DEMONSTRATE GOOD PRACTICE, SHARE THEIR KNOWLEDGE THROUGH CONVERSATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS, AND ALSO PROVIDE FEEDBACK TO LEARNERS, SUCH AS STUDENTS AND NOVICES. THESE TYPES OF INTERACTIONS OCCUR WHEN POSITIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES ENCOURAGE TRUST AND OPENNESS BETWEEN STAFF; WHEN THE MANAGEMENT TEAM PROVIDES SESSIONS FOR STAFF TO LEARN HOW TO INTERACT WITH LEARNERS, AND ALSO WHEN PARTNERSHIPS PROVIDE SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE AROUND LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE.

HENDERSON A., BRIGGS J., SCHOONBEEK S., & PATERSON K. (2011)

Conclusion

Leadership, management and partnerships are pivotal for the creation and maintenance of positive learning environments. Registered nurses are expected to share their nursing knowledge and expertise with their colleagues, including learners. This transfer of knowledge and support can be provided formally in a preceptor-learner relationship, or in an ongoing, informal process. Effective communication between those involved in the formal support system ensures a successful educational experience for the learner and for participating registered nurses, and ensures that the patients receives safe, competent and ethical care.

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ISBN 1 895613-60-4

June, 2016