

The "Reflections" column features human interest stories about life-changing experiences with patients or other nursing school experiences. Send your query letter to nsna@nsna.org att: Managing editor.

Experiencing an Externship

By Lissa Nelson, Maura Hayden, and Bernice Wren

A nurse extern program is a mutually beneficial arrangement for both the extern and the institution. An extern program affords nursing students a unique opportunity to build upon their nursing skills, increase their exposure to the clinical setting, supplement the current curriculum and increase their confidence. Externs gain hands-on experience working alongside preceptors; they observe and participate in a wide variety of specialties and are paid for every shift worked. Each hospital that offers externships has different qualification requirements. We participated in a program conducted by the Nursing Education Department at North Shore-LIJ Health System, and they required the following: completion of one clinical nursing course, two letters of reference, an essay, a student transcript, and good standing in a nursing education program. (See the info box.)

Our Stories

Maura Hayden, student at the University of Scranton, PA, remembers her experiences during the summer of 2006.

On my way back to Long Island after another year of school at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, I thought about the externship I was going to be partaking in, thinking how this summer was going to be like all the others, another summer with another job. Looking back, I now know how wrong I was. Within my first week as a nurse extern at Forest Hills Hospital in the Post Anesthesia Care Unit (PACU) I realized how beneficial this summer would be. After my first three 12-hour shifts, I became aware of the changes I would be adjusting to during these eight weeks. From the academic advantages of being a nurse extern to the social disadvantages of working so much, I knew it would be a different summer than I had been used to. In my final week of the externship, I could



Bernice Wren and Maura Hayden at the North Shore LIJ Forest Hills Hospital, NY, during their 2006 Summer Externship period.

see the benefits these changes gave me. This experience showed me a new outlook on nursing, provided me with independence and gave me the confidence to handle all future endeavors thrown my way.

After meeting my preceptor Shelley, I knew I was in good hands. For the entire externship, I shadowed Shelley as she took care of recovering patients. We ate lunch together, she taught me some tricks of nursing she picked up along the way, and she showed me the greatest thing possible: how to be a great nurse. Not only was I lucky enough to meet Shelley, but the rest of the PACU staff provided me a wealth of knowledge and experience. I learned many skills from these people that frankly cannot be taught in a classroom. Working alongside the staff in our small unit on the seventh floor, I saw the power of teamwork. All of the nurses in the recovery room worked together to provide the best care for their patients. If anyone needed help with anything, there was always someone more than willing to lend a helping hand. Thanks to my time with Shelley and the rest of the nurses and PCAs, I learned that no matter how much you've learned

on your own as a nurse, you can always use the wisdom and help of another to provide the best for your patient.

Although it seems odd, I feel that by following Shelley and the other nurses around for eight weeks I gained a sort of independence in the profession. I chose to develop relationships with my colleagues. I also made an effort to learn something from each patient I saw. Depending on the patient, I used the Pyxis Medstation, a medication management system, to look up information on the drugs the patient was receiving or searched on a medical website for a diagnosis I didn't understand. Sometimes I would learn from a patient by just holding his hand while he was waiting for his medication and in pain, or by simply talking to him because I noticed it kept the oxygen saturation level up. One of the best things about this externship was that there were so many excellent resources to use whenever I had a question

or problem. I chose to independently use the resources available to me and I took full advantage of this amazing opportunity.

As the summer came to an end, I couldn't wait to go back to school. I would miss everyone at the hospital, but I knew that everything I learned from them would stay with me, especially during my clinical experiences in the fall. I know I was eager because I felt more confident about tackling nursing clinicals again. I feel more comfortable

approaching patients and talking with them and I feel secure that nursing is the right profession for me.

The most important thing I gained from this experience is the confidence I have in myself as a nursing student. My time as a nurse extern provided me with a passion for nursing. This passion helped wake me up the next morning to begin a new day and gave me the heart to provide patients with the best care I could.

Externship Openings and Requirements

For hospitals that offer similar programs, visit the NSNA Career Center at www.nsna.org/career/internships.asp. Each hospital has different criteria and openings – check them out!

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Bernice Wrenn, a senior nursing student at the College of Mount Saint Vincent had the following experience as a nurse extern:

When it came to actually doing an externship program, I was somewhat concerned because I would not be with my clinical instructor and my fellow students. I would be one-on-one with an actual registered nurse, taking care of patients together. I didn't know what was going to happen to me this summer as a nurse extern, but I was willing to find out.

As it turns out, being in a summer nurse externship program was the best decision that I could have ever made! At first, it was a slow process to adapt to new surroundings. The staff on the floor that I worked on treated me as if I had been a part of their team for a long time. This really made the transition easier to go through. I had a wonderful preceptor who really took her job and patients seriously. One of the things I learned from my preceptor is that even when you have a rough day, you can still laugh and smile because you did the best you could that day.

The whole summer experience really put everything that I have learned from my nursing classes into perspective. This was the time where I was really able to use the therapeutic skills I was taught. I saw first hand that just one gentle touch or simply being quiet while a patient is telling his or her story really makes a difference. I learned to be more observant when doing head to toe assessments because your care plan is not only based on a physician's findings, but on your own findings as a nurse. For example, I was able to pick up on a patient who was developing a stage one pressure sore.

Being in a summer externship program was a great yet humbling experience for me. I would recommend an extern program to all nursing students. It made me appreciate every nurse in America and the various roles they take on in our health care system." ©

