

The "Reflections" column features human interest stories about life-changing experiences with patients or other nursing school experiences.

A Summer of Possibilities: Life as a Student Nurse Technician

By Laura D. Webb

As a rising senior in the Department of Nursing at North Carolina Central University, I was surrounded by medical facilities that offered summer nursing externships. I was offered a position at Durham Veterans Administration Medical Center (DVAMC). Since I had completed both semesters of my junior clinical (med/surg) experience there, I knew that DVAMC offered a supportive, educational environment. I had met and observed the medical center's Associate Chief for Nursing Education, Gwen Waddell-Schulz, and was convinced that she and her associates would provide a high quality educational experience. Happily, my assumptions were correct.

Monday, May 16, 2005, was day one of my "tour" as a Student Nurse Technician (SNT). I soon met my summer colleagues: three other nursing students participating in the summer program. All three were rising seniors in the nursing program at UNC Chapel Hill. From those first weeks, we bonded as fellow professional neophytes, building our confidence through mutual support.

The Durham VA justifiably prides itself on its high quality patient care, its dynamic academic environment and its high employee satisfaction. In my ten-week experience, I validated all of those qualities. The high quality patient care was evident in the consistent manner in which the nursing staff holistically addressed patient and family needs and concerns. The medical staff employed a team approach,



giving top priority to patient safety and comfort. In fact, patients and family frequently commented on the high quality of their care. The academic side of life there was also ever present. RN preceptors were always willing to assist us in understanding specific pathophysiology as well as the rationale behind pharmacological and other interventions.

The weekly seminars led by primary instructor Meg Summey reinforced our learning by providing insight into our observations. We were introduced to numerous educational resources, including the DVAMC library and computer links. Meg helped us focus on prioritizing assignments, maximizing our preceptor interaction, and even helped us practice a new grad interview.

We had a comprehensive orientation to hospital policies, nursing care, and our individual units. We were each assigned to individual RN preceptors. I spent four weeks on the surgery unit, a week in the medical intensive care unit, and another four weeks on a medical unit. I was also given the opportunity to shadow and assist the wound-ostomy-continance (WOC) nurses, Mary Kay Wooten and Mary Powell, and the IV team.

Staff satisfaction was also evident. Many were interested in helping me hone my skills. For example, in the Medical Intensive Care Unit (MICU) rotation, my RN preceptor and other RNs in the unit provided direct instruction

about the care of their patients in the unit. I witnessed several highly technical procedures, including insertion of a Swann-Ganz catheter. The RNs never tired seemed to tire of my constant questioning. I even found myself walking out with my preceptor, discussing an issue all the way to the parking deck!

During our weekly meetings, my colleagues and I compared notes on experiences and our preceptors. We all agreed that they were selected because of their skills in teaching and clinical knowledge. My preceptors included me in all appropriate aspects of patient care, documentation, shift report, and education of patients and family. They also encouraged me to learn about unfamiliar concepts, disorders and procedures. I was able to make real progress in prioritizing nursing care to be delivered in a single shift. Throughout my summer SNT experience I found the staff to be extremely well informed and supportive, readily available, and open to questions.

A vast array of instruction and clinical skills development was provided in this experience, including:

- Documentation (computer and hard-copy) of strategies and procedures;
- Hospital protocol and policies;
- Wound and ostomy care (including preventive skin care);
- Equipment use and maintenance (wound vacs, air beds, trapezes, lift devices);
- Research and presentation skills (including interview techniques);
- Intravenous lines and percutaneous access (although managing these lines was outside of our scope, we

were given many opportunities to observe and learn about their use);

- Medication administration and documentation (again, administration was outside of our scope but we were given ample opportunities for discussion, observation and research). We had to know the meds, indications, and expected results!
- Education of patients and family;
- Admission and discharge procedures (completing forms, taking patient history, and documenting vital signs);
- Skin care (completing Braden scale assessment and the VA's special "Skin Angel" program);
- Diet (regular, soft, thickened, renal, diabetic, low-fat, and high protein/calorie)
- Ongoing patient care (including bed making, patient bathing, vital sign readings and documentation, blood glucose monitoring, placement and discontinuation of urinary catheters, patient transfers).

Throughout the summer we completed a long list of competencies and skills that were individually validated by our preceptors. Coincidentally, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations (JCAHO) was conducting a survey during our assignment. We prepared along with the staff for the visit, especially in reviewing patient safety goals.

Projects were also required. I teamed up with another SNT to create an insulin bulletin board for the surgical unit that included such information as PEAK and THROUGH times. We also created an accompanying flyer and presented it at a staff meeting. This project brought positive feedback from staff, patients and family members.

We were also encouraged to select

our own special experiences. We then worked with the instructor to present a report, describing our reasons for selecting the experience, the nurse's role in our selected environment, and what we learned from the overall experience. For my specialty experience, I shadowed wound-ostomy-continance (WOC) nurses. The role of the advanced practice WOC RN is very comprehensive, including treatment of wounds, stomas, and continence issues. It also includes consultation and education of clients, families, and members of the treatment team. During this experience, I observed nursing care relating to several types of wound care (including stomas, surgical incisions and amputations, infected and necrotic wounds, and pressure and vascular ulcers). I also learned the role of wound vacs, various dressings, positioning, and adequate nutrition in maintaining skin integrity and promoting healing.

Overall, my summer experience was an excellent "real-time" learning experience. In addition to providing me with the opportunity to learn and practice a wide range of nursing skills, it enhanced my own personal and professional development. In the process, I met new colleagues and had the good fortune to observe multiple positive role models in my chosen profession. I am grateful for this profound opportunity and highly recommend it to other nursing students.

This experience assisted me in the transition from a junior to senior nursing student. I entered the last year of nursing school with additional experience with patients, family, future colleagues, and settings where nurses practice. I built not only my experience and confidence, but also my competence in a learning environment. It was an amazing way to spend a summer! ☺

We learned about prioritization of assignments, focused on maximizing our preceptor interaction, and even practiced a new grad interview.



Laura D. Webb, BSN, RN, is in new grad orientation on the medicine-oncology floor of the Durham VA Medical Center. She hopes to focus on palliative and hospice care.