



A CAREER IN CRITICAL CARE NURSING

BY MICHELE WOLFF, MSN, CCRN, RN

At a recent NSNA convention, hundreds of students visited the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) exhibit where they shared their reasons for considering a career in critical care nursing. Many said that they love the pace and excitement critical care offers. Others said that they like the idea of working one-on-one with patients and feeling that they are making a difference. One student who works as a nursing assistant in the ICU, said that she learned "how to cry, laugh, pray, and rejoice."

Are you considering a job in critical care? Did you know that more and more hospitals are developing new graduate internship and orientation programs? Just a few years ago, it was nearly impossible for new graduate nurses to get a job in critical care. Now, opportunities for new graduates to work with critically ill patients are greater than ever.

I began my nursing career in a critical care unit, and have never looked back. My background in critical care has helped me in countless ways as I move through various phases of my career. I chose critical care for many of the same reasons students today are drawn to critical care: for the challenge, excitement, and adrenaline rush of the ICU environment. I loved constantly learning new things, working with complex equipment, and keeping up with the latest technology. The low patient-to-nurse ratio allowed me to assess and provide more individualized care for my patients. I admired and respected the experienced ICU nurses

who artfully balanced the efficiency of competent care with genuine compassion and caring for their patients and families.

My first job as a new graduate was on a pediatric-cardiac care step-down ICU. Like many new graduates, I had been advised to work in an adult medical/surgical area for at least a year before specializing. When I was offered the pediatric job, I decided to give it a try. I found my first year very challenging, and even discouraging at times. I thought I had learned a lot in school, but there was so much I did not know! One of my greatest survival strategies was to not let myself get overwhelmed. I learned to concentrate on the most important information and revisit a subject repeatedly until I understood the big picture. Throughout my career, I have used this technique and I still learn new things every day. This continual growth and learning is what has helped me to achieve many of my career goals.

After working in the Step-Down unit for several years, I was ready for a new challenge. Although I was a bit intimidated by the activity and noise of the busy pediatric ICU (PICU) environment, I took a job as a staff nurse working the night shift. The more time I spent taking care of critically ill children and their families, the more I loved it. I particularly liked the challenge of using my assessment skills and knowledge of physiology to help me determine my patients' needs. I was forever moved by the times I provided compassionate care to families facing the death of their precious children. My greatest rewards were the visits,

cards, and photos of the "PICU graduates." I often found myself filled with emotion when I marveled at how my frail little patients had grown up to be so healthy, strong and full of life.

After a few years of working in the ICU, I challenged myself by volunteering to teach in a hospital continuing-education program. I was terrified at first, but once I got over my stage-fright, I was hooked! After several years of teaching classes whenever I could, I became the PICU educator. I was excited about applying my knowledge of patient care and teaching in a whole new way. I loved the opportunity to help both new graduate and experienced nurses.

With encouragement from my coworkers and manager, I went back to school for my MSN. Soon after I graduated, I became the clinical nurse specialist for the PICU, where I had many opportunities to pursue activities related to pediatric critical care. I taught at regional and national conferences; acted as regional faculty for the Pediatric Advanced Life Support program; served on regional and national American Heart Association committees; wrote chapters in pediatric textbooks; acted as research coordinator for multicenter studies; acted as legal consultant in medical malpractice cases; and made pediatric home health visits. One of my greatest challenges was deciding which activities I could fit into my busy schedule!

A few years ago, I decided to make another change when I began working as a clinical practice specialist for the American Association of Critical-Care

Nurses. I found that my critical care knowledge base helped me meet the challenge of developing products and services for critical care nurses. I enjoyed learning about many new aspects of intensive care nursing for children and adults. I soon realized that critical care extends beyond the doors of the traditional ICU, to anywhere critically ill patients need the specialized skills of ICU nurses. This may be in the cardiac cath lab; emergency department; post anesthesia recovery; telemetry unit; neonatal ICU; pediatric ICU; and even medical/surgical unit or home health.

When I was a nursing student, I dreamed about someday being a professor of nursing. After 15 years of working in many exciting and rewarding jobs, I recently accepted a position as a fulltime faculty member at Saddleback, a community college. I am excited about the opportunity to work closely with nursing students by helping them shape their nursing practice and make informed career decisions.

As I reflect on my career, I realize that my decision to enter critical care nursing provided me with many wonderful and exciting opportunities. I believe that my love for learning and my willingness to take risks and try new things have helped me keep my nursing career exciting. Connecting with strong, visionary, supportive mentors provided me with positive reinforcement and the courage to say, "yes, I can do it," even when I lacked self-confidence. I now know that my future career choices will continually challenge me with new and exciting ventures.

My advice to student nurses just beginning their careers is to follow your hearts and let go of your fears. Trust that you will make the best decision when the time is right. As you think about your future, consider the following questions:

- Do you love to continually grow and learn?
- Do you enjoy the challenge of correcting problems?
- Are you fascinated with the latest technology?
- Would you like to work with families dealing with major life crises?

- Do you see yourself trying a variety of different jobs in your nursing career?

These are all excellent reasons to consider critical care. Keep in mind that you can work in a variety of settings and get critical care experience. Try not to limit yourself when you are looking at available job openings. Look at them all and consider the ones that feel right for you.

Before taking that first job, think about the following suggestions:

- Take the time to reflect on your individual strengths and weaknesses. Choose the area that truly appeals to you. Don't follow the advice of others simply to please family and friends.
- Look for hospitals that structured orientation programs designed to meet the unique learning needs of new graduates. Don't sell yourself short— seek institutions willing to invest in you by preparing you thoroughly to care for patients on your own.
- Orientation programs are excellent for networking, providing the opportunity to meet other new nurses; the bonds you form during orientation will last your entire nursing career, and this peer network can provide you with the support you need as you deal with the challenges of transitioning from student to practicing nurse.

Consider joining a professional organization in your nursing specialty. Nursing organizations provide you with the latest resources you can use in your practice, and are a great addition to your resume. Attending local meetings is a great way to meet other motivated and proactive individuals (Consider NSNA Sustaining Membership after you graduate – a great way to stay connected).

Finally, look for a mentor or a role model. Having someone who can help encourage, guide and advocate for you helps you to grow and learn in your career. There are many experienced nurses who would be honored to be asked to serve as such an important part of a young nurse's career. Many times, the greatest hurdle is finding the courage to ask!

Wherever you do decide to take a job, enjoy it. Try to learn something new every day. Never let yourself become victim to negativity burnout, and complacency. Don't ever forget what special gifts you have to offer your patients, families and yourself!

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RESOURCES

- ANA Nursing Career Information <http://www.nursingworld.org/readroom/fsdemogr.htm>
- AJN Career Center www.nursingcenter.com/CAREER
- Career Development Services www.travcorps.com
- Career Choice Assistance www.jobhuntersbible.com
- Healthcare Career Help www.monsterhealthcare.com
- Health Career Information www.healthcareers.com
- Healthcare Career Site www.healthcaresource.com
- Resume Tutorial www1.umn.edu/obr/ecep/resume
- Salary Information <http://jobsmart.org/tools/salary/salbelth.htm#Nursing>
- Wall Street Journal Career Information <http://www.careers.wsj.com>

ADDITIONAL READING

- Bridges, W. *Job Shift: How to Prosper in a Workplace Without Jobs*. New York, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994.
- Case, B. *Career Planning for Nurses*. New York, Delmar Publishers/National Student Nurses' Association, 1997.
- Federwisch, A. Career shaping: Turning your job into the one you want. *Nurseweek* 12:7: 1,9, August 23, 1999.
- Hobbs, B. H. Taking charge of your career. *AJN* 98:1:36-40, Jan. 1998.
- Newell, M., and Pinardo, M. *Reinventing Your Nursing Career: A Handbook for Success in the Age of Managed Care*. Gaithersburg, MD, Aspen Publishers, 1998.