

EMERGENCY NURSING



By Anne Manton

Emergency nurses are elegant generalists...they must know a great deal about virtually all aspects of nursing...

“Is emergency nursing really like the television program ‘ER?’” I am frequently asked. My answer is *yes and no*. Yes, in that it is unpredictable, dramatic, challenging, and requires a team effort. Emergency

nursing is *not* like television in that the numerous life-threatening and dramatic events portrayed do not occur in rapid succession in a neat, one-hour time frame. In addition, the role of the emergency nurse in providing patient care is much more significant than is evident in the “made for TV” script.

As appealing as emergency nursing is for some of us, it is clearly not for everyone. The advantages are many. As an emergency nurse, I face a variety of challenges every day, which makes the work exciting. I feel privileged to help others during what is often the most difficult time of their lives. Emergency nurses are “elegant generalists”; that is, they must know a great deal about virtually all aspects of nursing. For example, nurses who work in a coronary care unit (CCU) must have a good knowledge base about cardiac disease. Nurses working in a maternal-newborn setting must be proficient in labor and delivery, pregnancy complications, and care of the

newborn. Nurses working on a psychiatric unit must know psychiatric assessment and interventions, including appropriate medications. In order to work effectively in the emergency department, the nurse needs to know all of the above and much more. In a typical day (if there is such a thing!) the emergency nurse may well treat patients with everything from severe respiratory distress, to chest pain, overdose incidences, seizures, pulmonary edema, and countless other scenarios. A similar list could be created for the nurse working in

the surgical area of the Emergency Department, including: fractures, lacerations, traumatic injuries, or ectopic pregnancies. You never know what your patient’s situation will be, yet you need to provide *the best possible nursing care no matter what*.

Emergency nursing is, by nature, sporadic and unpredictable. Unplanned situations and undiagnosed health problems require

prompt and accurate assessment and interventions. Motor vehicle crashes, heart attacks, strokes, falls, and hundreds of other emergency situations can happen to anyone. The sporadic nature of emergency care, however, contributes to what I believe is one of its greatest disadvantages—there is usually no opportunity to follow the patient’s progress. As one of my colleagues described it recently, “it’s like reading half a book or seeing half a movie.” Emergency patients range in age from minutes old to over 100 years

(continued on p.25)





old. Socioeconomic status varies from the richest to the poorest in society. While most patients are cooperative and grateful for their care, it is not unusual to experience angry and even combative behaviors. It is important that the emergency nurse be prepared for this vast variety of scenarios.

How does one prepare for a career in emergency care? Consider the following factors:

1. First, know yourself. Can you think on your feet and prioritize quickly? Do you have the flexibility to continually restructure your day, sometime by the minute? Then emergency nursing might be a good career choice for you. On the other hand, if you dislike multitasking, are uneasy in a high pressure environment, or if you prefer to focus on a few patients for the entire shift, then emergency nursing is probably NOT for you.

2. An emergency nurse *must* have good assessment skills, both in obtaining a health history as well as in physical assessment. In addition to recognizing abnormal findings, emergency nurses must be able to understand the significance of those deviations from the norm in order to determine urgency levels.

3. Emergency nurses need a strong knowledge base in every area of nursing, from pathophysiology to psychology, pharmacology, policies and procedures, and everything in between. But it is also important to know your limitations, and how and when to use resources appropriately.

4. Critical thinking and sharp decision-making are essential in emergency nursing, as in other nursing specialties. The difference in emergency nursing is that the patient's illness or injury state is frequently

undiagnosed. This presents an additional challenge in the care of emergency patients.

5. Good communication skills are imperative. Emergency patients and their families are often in a crisis situation, and the emergency nurse must have the ability to comfort, educate, and listen to patients and families in a caring, nonjudgmental manner. Other important attributes for success in the emergency nursing role are compassion, humor, good organizational skills, and being a team player.

Employers often expect emergency nurses to have completed courses such as Advanced Cardiac Life Support (ACLS), Trauma Nursing Core Course (TNCC), Emergency Nurses' Pediatric Course (ENPC), as well as certification in emergency nursing (CEN). In some cases, this education should have been completed prior to working in the department, while in other cases the courses can be completed over time.

I am frequently asked whether new graduates can and should be hired to work in the Emergency Department. As a general rule, I advise new graduates to gain experience in the medical/surgical setting first, to give them some solid experience. However, this is not necessarily the case for everyone. If the new graduate has worked previously in the emergency setting, as an emergency medical technician (EMT), or as a paramedic, they may be better prepared to jump into emergency nursing sooner. If the employer offers an extensive preceptor experience for the new graduate, this can also prove quite successful.

There are many opportunities for nurses with an interest in emergency care outside the Emergency Department setting, such as flight nursing and ground transport or prehospital care. Nurse educator, nurse manager, emergency nurse practitioner, psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner, and prehospital care coordinator are other possible choices within the hospital setting. Some hospitals are developing roles for nurses in disaster planning and management, mass casualty planning, and bioterrorism. Forensics and sexual assault nurse examiners (SANE) are other areas of interest, as are injury prevention education and community outreach roles.

As with most specialty areas of nursing, there are numerous positions available in emergency departments across the U.S., and predictions are that the need is likely to continue for years to come. As the health care system and technology advance, there will always be a need for emergency care and emergency nurses. Emergency nurses are heroes and heroines who make a positive difference in peoples' lives every day! ■

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The Journal of Emergency Nursing
Official publication of the Emergency Nurses Association. Published six times per year, it includes clinical articles, research articles, government updates, and more.



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