

CONTINUING NURSING EDUCATION

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The Nursing Thesaurus of International Nursing Index defines continuing education as "educational activities primarily designed to keep registered nurses abreast of their particular field of interest". Characteristics of continuing education are organised, planned educational experiences involving active participation of the learner and designed to improve an individual's professional competence after completion of a formal education. Continuing education for nurses must focus primarily on those planned learning experiences which relate directly to the practice and scope of nursing and nursing care. As a socially responsible and responsive profession, nursing must assure the competence of its practitioners.

Nurses have historically believed that their basic preparation prepared them for the rest of their working career. We must realize upon completion of our basic nursing programme whatever that programme may have been, that we have not finished learning, or learned everything there is to learn. Many of us have not accepted the fact that nursing education is a continuing process and that no one particular basic programme can ever prepare us for a lifetime of work. The technologic advances, knowledge, explosion and the public's demand for comprehensive health services make it essential that we continue our learning beyond our basic preparation. Keeping up-to-date is difficult and particularly so for those who are in leadership positions.

Four essential components for the development of continuing

education courses or programmes are: assessment of learning needs, and subsequent planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes. These efforts must be coordinated and require input from a variety of sources; however, all thinking must be community oriented. Continuing education in nursing is a necessity, a challenge, and a shared responsibility.

There are four aspects which may be identified as sharing responsibility for the development of continuing education programmes. These are: educational institutions; employers; professional associations; and the nurse herself/himself. I would like to comment briefly on each aspect.

Educational institutions

Faculties in schools and colleges of nursing have a responsibility to instil in the student the concept of lifelong learning. Every college of nursing has a responsibility to plan, develop, and implement programmes in continuing education for the different levels of nursing personnel in its region. The educational institution prepared the basic practitioner, does the institution then not have a responsibility for the continuing education of its graduates? The institution is equipped to provide facilities and resources necessary to conduct such programmes.

Employers

Employers must recognise their responsibilities to permit nursing staff to participate in continuing education activities and programmes. Such participation should include not only inservice education

programmes within the institution, but must extend beyond institution organised, sponsored and based programmes. Such factors as financial assistance and study leave must be considered.

Professional association

There are further opportunities for continuous learning through programmes and activities offered by the professional associations and other organizations. The association can also sponsor and organise continuing education activities on a statewide, regional or geographic basis, and provide publicity through the Journal.

The Nurse

The onus for each one of us to keep up to date with current knowledge and nursing practice is an individual responsibility. Each one of us is accountable to the public for providing them with quality health care services. However, someone must make continuing education programmes available, to enable all nurses to fulfill this responsibility as some individuals are not internally motivated.

The learning needs of nurses are vast and varied dependant on job responsibilities. Each one of us must assess our own learning needs, available resources, and then decide upon a suitable course of action. Individuals must make their learning needs known to the appropriate sources and take the initiative in finding continuing education activities to meet those needs. Those of us who have attended courses must share the information learned with our colleagues who could not attend, and use what has been learned in the work situation.

The employer, the professional association, and the educational institution must work together to plan effective programmes to meet the ever changing health needs of the public.

The concept of continuing nursing education asks some thought provoking questions which must be considered by the individual, educational institutions, employers and the professional association when continuing education courses or programmes are being planned.

Are many nurses not adequately motivated to learn for the sake of learning or to improve their nursing practice?

Are external symbols such as certificates or degrees, necessary to encourage nurses to continue to learn?

Does an individual not have a responsibility to determine her/his learning needs?

Is the concept of continuing education, the whole aspect of keeping abreast of knowledge and skills in one's work, too important to be left to an individual responsibility?

Should evidence of attendance at continuing education courses be required for merit increases?

Should evidence of attendance at continuing education courses be a requirement to maintain licensure?

If a certain number of hours/courses yearly of continuing education offerings were to be considered as a requirement to main-

tain licensure, would programmes be easily available for nurses all over the country? What about those nurses who work in remote rural areas?

Who would be responsible to assess the various courses as to their content, duration, participating teachers, standards and criteria involved, and maintain the records?

How does one, or can, or should one, assess those who learn "on the job"? How can recognition be given to individual study, or reading, one of our most accessible and invaluable means of learning?

In determining continuing education requirements, how do we, or do we evaluate for differences in job responsibilities, for example, the differences between staff nurse, ward sister, and matron?

In developing continuing education courses, should different methods of teaching/learning be utilized? Why not explore new developments in educational technology, and other methods of learning such as correspondence courses and the concept of the open university or external degree for some nursing courses? At present there is no evidence that participation in any educational programme guarantees learning.

What can be done to help the learner utilize her learning in the working situation?

If we believe that continuing education is an important concept, how much, and of what kind, and

who decides these important issues? Who should ultimately assume responsibility for continuing nursing education?

It is anticipated that programmes in continuing education in nursing can provide safer and more knowledgeable practice, better utilization of the different categories of nursing personnel and assist in the development of newer ways of delivery of health services. Continuing nursing education must be seen as a vital and necessary component of nursing education. Educational opportunities must be made available so that nurses can continue to provide quality in nursing care; for as nurses, we are accountable to the public.

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