AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PROVISION OF SUPPORT WITHIN TRANSITION TO PRACTICE PROGRAMS FOR NEW GRADUATE NURSES IN RURAL HEALTH SETTINGS

Jacqueline Lea

RN, BN (UNE), MNurs(Hons) (UNE)

A thesis submitted for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Health University of Canberra

June 2013
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the contribution that the following people have made to the conception and implementation of this research study and to the writing and presentation of this thesis.

My principal supervisor, Professor Mary Cruickshank, for her expert advice and guidance and her unfailing support and encouragement.

My co-supervisor, Dr Laurie Grealish for her support and guidance.

The new graduate nurses and the experienced rural nurses who took time out from their busy lives to share their experiences with me.

Christine Perrott and Ann Young for their advice and editing service.

Cindy Blanch for formatting this thesis.

My family, Jim, Hannah, Joe and Liam for their loving support and patience during the time I have been pre-occupied with this study.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements i  
Certification iii  
Table of Contents v  
List of Tables xi  
List of Figures xiii  
List of Appendices xv  
Abstract xvii

**Chapter One – Introduction**  
1 Introduction 1  
1.1 Background to the Study 1  
1.2 Purpose of the Study 7  
1.2.1 Research Question 8  
1.3 Significance of the Study 8  
1.4 Methodology 9  
1.5 Limitations and Key Assumptions 11  
1.6 Definition of Terms 11  
1.7 Organisation of the Thesis 13  
1.8 Conclusion 15

**Chapter Two – Literature Review**  
2 Introduction 17  
2.1 Section One 19  
2.1.1 Rural Nursing Practice in Australia 19  
2.1.2 The New Graduate Nurse in Rural Practice 21  

2.2 Section Two 25
Chapter Three - Methodology

3 Introduction

3.1 Justification for the Qualitative Paradigm

3.2 Justification for the Research Design and Methodology

3.3 Research Procedure

3.3.1 Setting

3.3.2 Sampling Procedure

3.3.3 Sampling Procedure for the Environmental Survey

3.3.4 Sampling Procedure for the New Graduate Nurse

3.3.5 Sampling Procedure for the Experienced Rural Registered Nurse

3.4 Instrumentation

3.4.1 Phase One: Environmental Survey

3.4.2 Interview Schedules for New Graduate Nurses

3.4.3 Interview Schedule for Experienced Registered Nurses

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

3.5.1 Pilot Telephone Survey

3.5.2 Pilot Interview for Individual Interviews

3.6 Phase One: Environmental Survey
3.7 Phase Two: Individual Interviews 96
3.8 Individual Interviews with New Graduate Nurses 97
3.9 Individual Interviews with Experienced Rural Registered Nurses 99
3.10 Researcher’s Journal 101
3.11 Data Analysis 101
   3.11.1 Phase One: Data Analysis Procedure for the Environmental Survey 101
   3.11.2 Phase Two: Data Analysis Procedure for the Individual Interviews for New
   Graduate Nurses and Experienced Registered Nurses 102
3.12 Ethical Considerations 103
   3.12.1 Phase One: Environmental Survey 104
   3.12.2 Phase Two: Individual Interviews 105
3.13 Rigour and Trustworthiness of the Study 106
3.14 Methodological Issues and Limitations 109
3.15 Conclusion 110

Chapter Four – Data Analysis 111

4 Introduction 111

   4.1 Justification of the Data Analysis Technique for the Environmental Survey of the
   Potential Study Sites 112
   4.2 Phase One: Results and Profiles of the Rural Transition to Practice Program 114
      4.2.1 Category One: Employment of New Graduate Nurses 116
      4.2.2 Category Two: Responsibility for the Transition to Practice Program 116
      4.2.3 Category Three: Structured Clinical Rotations within Rural Transition to
         Practice Programs 117
      4.2.4 Category Four: Formal Employee Orientation and Induction within the Rural
         Transition to Practice Programs 118
      4.2.5 Category Five: Formal Education Activities within Rural Transition to
         Practice Program 119
      4.2.6 Category Six: Supernumerary Days within Rural Transition to Practice
         Program 120
      4.2.7 Category Seven: Model of Structured Support within Rural Transition to
         Practice Program 120
      4.2.8 Category Eight: Performance Evaluation of New Graduate Nurses within
         Rural Transition to Practice Program 121
4.3 Phase Two: Justification of the Data Analysis Technique for the Individual Interviews with New Graduate Nurses and Experienced Rural Registered Nurses

4.4 Phase Two: Results of the Demographic and Interview Data of the New Graduate Nurses

4.5 Profile of the New Graduate Nurse Participants

4.6 Results of the Thematic Analysis of the Individual Interviews with New Graduate Nurses in Rural Practice and the Experienced Rural Nurses

4.7 Results of the Interviews with New Graduate Nurses

   4.7.1 The First Stage of Transition

       4.7.1.1 Theme One: Getting Started at the 3-4 Month Milestone

       4.7.1.1.1 Subtheme 1.1: Influences on Support while Stepping into the Rural RN Role

       4.7.1.1.2 Subtheme 1.2: The Rural Transition to Practice Program

       4.7.1.1.3 Subtheme 1.3: Support Experiences Versus Support Needs

   4.7.2 The Second Stage of Transition

       4.7.2.1 Theme Two: Settling in at the 6-7 Month Milestone

       4.7.2.1.1 Subtheme 2.1: Influences on Support while Settling in to the Rural RN Role

       4.7.2.1.2 Subtheme 2.2: The Rural Transition to Practice Program

       4.7.2.1.3 Subtheme 2.3: Support Experiences Versus Support Needs

   4.7.3 The Third Stage of Transition

       4.7.3.1 Theme Three: Just Another Nurse at the 11-12 Month Milestone

       4.7.3.1.1 Subtheme 3.1: Influences on Support While Immersed in the Rural RN Role

       4.7.3.1.2 Subtheme 3.2: The Rural Transition to Practice Program

       4.7.3.1.3 Subtheme 3.3: Support Experiences Versus Support Needs

4.8 Results of the Demographic and Interview Data of the Experienced Rural Registered Nurse

4.9 Profile of the Experienced Rural Registered Nurse Participants

4.10 Results of the Thematic Analysis of the Experienced Rural Registered Nurse Individual In-depth Interviews

   4.10.1 Theme Four: The Rural RNs Experience with Newly Graduated Nurses in Rural Practice

viii
Chapter Five – Discussion and Conclusion

5 Introduction

5.1 Major Conclusions and Discussion

5.2 The Findings and Conclusions within the Context of the Theoretical Framework (Refer to Fig 5.1) and Previous Research

5.2.1 Conclusion One: The Stages of Transition within the Rural Practice Context

5.2.1.1 The Doing Stage of Transition at the 3-4 Month Milestone

5.2.1.2 The Being Stage of Transition at the 6-7 Month Milestone (Refer to Fig 5.1)

5.2.1.3 The Knowing Stage of Transition at the 10-12 Month Milestone (Refer to Fig 5.1)

5.2.2 Conclusion Two: Barriers to the Rural Transition to Practice Program

5.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

5.4 Recommendations for Further Research

5.5 Conclusion

References

Appendices
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1 Definition of Terms 12

Table 3.1 Characteristics of Rural Sites Selected for this Study 83

Table 3.2 Location and Number of Participants in Case Study 100

Table 4.1 Profile of Rural Transition to Practice Programs 114

Table 4.2 Profile of New Graduate Nurse Participants 127

Table 4.3 Themes and Subthemes that Emerged from the Data Analysis 130

Table 4.4 Profile of the Experienced Rural Registered Nurse Participants 188

Table 5.1 Themes and Subthemes that Emerged from the Data 213

Table 5.2 Doing Stage of Transition 217

Table 5.3 Being Stage of Transition 224

Table 5.4 Knowing State of Transition 231

Table 5.5 Guidelines for Contextualising a Rural Transition to Practice Program for New Graduate Nurses 248
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.1</td>
<td>Stages of Transition Theory</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.1</td>
<td>New South Wales Local Hospital Networks</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.1</td>
<td>Stages of Transition Theory</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview Schedule with New Graduate Nurses at 3 Months 279
Appendix 2. Interview Schedule with New Graduate Nurses at 6 Months 281
Appendix 3. Interview Schedule with New Graduate Nurses at 11 months 283
Appendix 4. Interview Schedule with Registered Nurses 285
Appendix 5. Environmental Survey 287
Appendix 6. Plain Language Statement 289
Appendix 7. New Graduate Nurse Participant Profile 291
Appendix 8. Registered Nurse Participant Profile 293
Appendix 9. Consent Form 295
ABSTRACT

In Australia, very few new graduate nurses enter the rural nursing workforce, and those who do go to large regional area health services. Little is known about the role transition process experienced by the small number of graduates working in rural health services and even less is known about their support needs during the transition process. The new graduate nurse who enters the rural health workforce enters a professional practice very different from metropolitan nursing practice and also from what they have experienced in their preparation for professional nursing practice. In the rural practice environment many nursing graduates will be expected by employers to have high levels of independence, well-developed problem solving abilities and assume management and leadership responsibilities early in their graduate year. The diversity and complexity of rural nursing practice, coupled with the present staffing ratios and skill mixes within rural health services, often prevents the new graduate from having time to make an effective transition into the nursing workforce and also significantly impacts on the educational and support services that can be offered to new graduate nurses in transition programs in rural health services. This study sought to investigate the nature and timing of support required for the safe transition to the rural nursing workforce.

Using a qualitative, exploratory, descriptive longitudinal case study design, this study was conducted in rural health services within one area health service of northern New South Wales, Australia. Data collection for this study occurred in two phases. First, a questionnaire of rural nurses responsible for Transition to Practice Programs within rural health services was conducted in Phase One of the Study. In Phase Two, individual interviews with new graduate nurses occurred at three points in time at intervals consistent with Duchscher’s Stages of Transition Theory (2008, p. 443), which was utilised as the theoretical framework for this study. Also in Phase Two, individual interviews were conducted with experienced rural nurses who, at the time of the study, worked with the new graduate nurses.
The data were analysed using content analysis in Phase One and thematic analysis in Phase Two and the findings from Phase Two have been presented as four major themes.

This study found that the new graduate nurse making the transition to professional rural nursing practice moves along the transition continuum described by Duchscher (2008) and that there are particular and unique aspects of the rural nurses role and responsibilities for which new graduate nurses require learning support during their transition to rural nursing practice. This study also found that there is minimal understanding at the individual clinical unit level, local health service level, and at the Area health service level, of the support needs of the new graduate nurse who is making the transition to rural nursing practice.

This study has implications for practice and policy in relation to the support offered within rural Transition to Practice Programs and for the recruitment and retention of graduate nurses to the rural nursing workforce. Recommendations for addressing the nature and timing of support to provide for a safe, supported transition to the rural nursing workforce are made. A proposed framework that would support a Transition to Practice Program in the rural context is presented and discussed. The framework consists of five principles and each principle provides strategies on which to base structural decisions when designing and developing a rural Transition to Practice Program.

Further investigation regarding the provision of support during the transition from student to professional practicing rural nurse is required. As this case study was conducted in only one area health service of northern New South Wales it is recommended that this study be replicated and extended to all rural areas of New South Wales to determine and compare similarities and differences in the level of support offered by other rural Area health services.