

Advanced skills for enrolled nurses: a developing classification

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D Pratt, B Cummins and L Kennewell were responsible for the projects design and implementation. L Cusack, B Cummins, L Kennewell, D Pratt and L Dennett developed the initial publication outline. L Cusack and M Smith wrote the first draft manuscript. All authors reviewed the final manuscript and made critical revisions for important intellectual content.

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KEY WORDS

enrolled nurse; advanced skill; industrial classification; role differentiation; Australia.

ABSTRACT

Objective

This paper is a report of a literature review designed to identify strategies central to the implementation of the industrial classification of enrolled nurses (second level nurse) with advanced skills within Australia.

Setting

Australian healthcare and aged care organisations that employ enrolled nurses.

Primary Argument

Designing a clearly defined enrolled nurse with advanced skills role within an industrial classification, requires incorporation of advanced competencies, scope of practice articulation and specifically targeted organisational policies and procedures. These three areas are fundamental to successful role implementation.

Conclusion

There is limited discussion in the literature on strategies to ensure effective implementation of the enrolled nurse with advanced skills role. In addition minimal research has been reported on the effectiveness of these roles in enhancing patient care and increasing workforce flexibility and efficiency. Further research and evaluation of the enrolled nurse with advanced skills is urgently required.

INTRODUCTION

An enrolled nursing industrial classification for advanced skills was introduced into a number of jurisdictions across Australia to increase the responsiveness of the workforce to contemporary health care challenges. This initiative represented an opportunity to respond to the changing health care scene by providing a more structured enrolled nursing model of care that embraces advanced skills and knowledge within a collaborative nursing framework (Milson-Hawke and Higgins 2003). Introducing an enrolled nurse with advanced skills within revised models of care has the potential to increase the capacity of the health workforce and therefore to meet growing demand in areas of strategic relevance to workforce development and clinical care.

This paper presents a comprehensive review of the literature designed to identify successful strategies for the implementation of the industrial classification of enrolled nurse (second level nurse) advanced skills.

BACKGROUND

The enrolled nurse with advanced skills builds on the role of the enrolled nurse. The enrolled nurse is known in some countries as the 'second level nurse' or 'division two nurse'. For the purpose of this paper the nomenclature enrolled nurse (EN) will be used. Internationally the EN position has changed markedly over the years. In New Zealand and England the EN position was withdrawn from the nursing workforce for a period of time but has re-emerged. However, in Canada, the United States of America and Australia, the role has continued to be part of the nursing workforce (Blay and Donoghue 2007; Australian Nursing Federation 2005; Heartfield and Gibson 2005). In Australia the training of ENs occurs in the vocational sector and is currently at Diploma level (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council 2009). There are advanced practice postgraduate courses that support the development of the EN with advanced skills. These courses enable the development of EN skills and knowledge in specific areas of nursing practice, including assessment, care and clinical management.

The last fifteen years has seen most states and territories in Australia recognise an advanced EN industrial classification. In 1999, New South Wales introduced the first advanced EN classification within Australia. This was followed by other jurisdictions including the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland (Australian Nursing Federation, 2005). More recently South Australia has introduced an advanced EN classification (Government of South Australia SA Health 2011).

The Australian Nursing Federation in 2005 noted that in the different states of Australia, advanced practice classifications had differing interpretations and titles such as Special Grade and Exemplary Practice, EN (Advanced Practice N1). Victoria has three levels of enrolled nurse classification, with level 3 relating to advanced enrolled nurse practice (State Government of Victoria - Department of Health, 2012). South Australia, in 2011, added a different title to the list of advanced EN classifications that of Advanced Skills Enrolled Nurse (ASEN).

To be effective the role of the enrolled nurse with advanced skills must be clearly differentiated from both the EN and registered nurse (RN) role. In Australia the RN is prepared at bachelor degree level within the university sector. This level of education enables the RN to demonstrate a higher level of accountability for patient care through higher level critical analysis and decision making. The EN and the enrolled nurse with advanced skills work under the supervision of the RN. They are responsible for their actions and are accountable for all functions delegated to them by the RN (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2002). Jacob et al (2013) suggest that to date, current approaches to adequately delineating EN and RN roles have failed. This concern was identified previously by Chaboyer et al (2008) who noted many similarities between the roles of EN and RN. Nankervis et al (2008) also noted significant examples of role confusion due to the perceived

similarities between the two classifications. Jacob et al (2012) suggested that reducing role confusion and ambiguity between EN and RN is essential if healthcare services are to effectively utilise the knowledge and skills of the existing workforce. Therefore clear role delineation is necessary for the EN with advanced skills to prevent further role confusion and to be effective in enhancing healthcare.

METHOD

A comprehensive search of peer reviewed literature using Scopus, CINAHL and Informat was undertaken. A search of the websites of Australian Departments of Health and the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) occurred to locate grey literature. A snowball approach was used to identify further references from previously sourced articles and policy documents. As a literature based study this work did not require approval by a human research ethics committee.

Findings

No peer reviewed studies that addressed the industrial classification of EN with advanced skills were identified. The review of the grey literature however, suggested a coordinated, multi-strategy approach was necessary for the design and implementation of an effective EN with advanced skills role. From the literature three themes emerged. These themes were; competency domains for the enrolled nurse with advanced skills; scope of practice for the enrolled nurse with advanced skills; and organisational policies and procedures to define specific work requirements of the enrolled nurse with advanced skills.

Theme 1- Competency domains for enrolled nurses with advanced skills

The need for comprehensive competency domains was identified as the first theme in the literature. The use of competency domains was considered a central strategy to implementation of the EN with advanced skills.

The Australian Nursing Federation (2005) undertook a synthesis of information on advanced EN classifications across all Australian jurisdictions and identified broad competency standards for the EN with advanced skills. Advanced EN competencies covered professional development, provision of clinical care and management of self and others. They also include leadership, coordination, administration and management; as well as clinical skills, technical tasks, care delivery and clinical responsibilities (Australian Nursing Federation 2005). The competencies were broad by necessity to ensure they were relevant to diverse practice settings.

In South Australia further work was undertaken to revise and refine advanced EN competencies (Government of South Australia, SA Health 2011). Two key national documents Australian Nursing Federation (2005) and Australian Qualifications Framework (2011) informed advanced practice definitions and competency domains for Advanced Skills Enrolled Nurses (ASEN). The competencies were congruent with the AQF Advanced Diploma level to ensure employers that postgraduate qualifications met the correct level of ASEN responsibilities. The first two of the revised competency domains were very similar to the original ANF documentation and the other jurisdictions approaches.

The first competency domain (Government of South Australia SA Health 2011) was *Advanced skills and knowledge in client/patient assessment*. This competency domain identified the ASEN was able to contribute to client/patient assessment using advanced skills and knowledge to produce a holistic assessment and to determine the health status and nursing needs of a client/patient or group.

The second competency domain *Advanced skills and knowledge in the provision of care management* enabled the ASEN to contribute to care management and planning using their advanced skills and knowledge.

The third competency domain required *Advanced skills and knowledge in leadership responsibilities*. This domain was different to other Australian jurisdictions on advanced practice for ENs because of the increased emphasis on the ASEN as a clinical leader.

Advanced competencies were considered central to implementation of the EN with advanced skills and assist with enabling role clarity. Advanced scope of practice is the focus of the next theme.

Theme 2 - Advanced scope of practice for the enrolled nurse with advanced skills

Addressing contemporary scope of practice issues for the EN with advanced skills was the second theme evident in the literature.

Milson-Hawke and Higgins (2004) explored how advanced scope of practice for ENs developed in Australia. They were critical that ENs had determined over time their own scope of practice as they undertook or were delegated nursing activities beyond their level of preparation. Therefore, they were advancing their practice without formal recognition by the organisation they worked for or by the nursing profession.

Jacob et al (2013) explored scope of practice challenges for ENs. They warned that expansion of the ENs' scope of practice risked RN role overlap with further confusion between EN and RN roles. They also questioned the potential benefits to patient care of advanced EN roles given the lack of evidence to support this change.

The use of role specifications or job descriptions contributes to defining scope of practice. The health departments in New South Wales (New South Wales Government Health, 2014) and South Australia (Government of South Australia, SA Health, 2011) developed a specific job description template for health services to use when introducing the role into their clinical setting. This strategy was to ensure the role met health care service needs and to clarify the skill expectations of the advanced role (Government of South Australia, SA Health, 2011). South Australia also required the ASEN to demonstrate specialisation in a field of nursing practice, higher-level skills and knowledge, as well as a higher-level of delegation of clinical and non-clinical roles (Government of South Australia SA Health 2011).

Post enrolment educational preparation and years of experience consistently emerged as an important strategy to differentiate between the EN and the EN with advanced skills (Blay and Donoghue 2007; Australian Nursing Federation 2005; Milson-Hawke and Higgins 2004). The most recent industrial consideration required for entry into an EN with advanced skills role was stated in the Nursing and Midwifery SA Public Sector Enterprise Agreement (Government of South Australian 2013). This agreement required the EN to have three years full time equivalent experience in the relevant clinical area and hold an Advanced Diploma of Enrolled Nursing. Without an advanced diploma, five years of equivalent full time experience was required.

As well as clearly defining scope of practice organisational policies and procedures are necessary to support the introduction of advanced EN roles as discussed in the next theme.

Theme 3 - organisational policies and procedures to enhance the enrolled nurse with advanced skills

Nankervis et al (2008) explored how ENs with advanced skills should be introduced to rural healthcare services. They recommended the use of policies and procedures to enable a well-structured change management process that engaged and empowered all the different levels of nurses in the workplace. This suggestion, and the recommended process, could equally apply to non-rural health services.

DISCUSSION

For the EN with advanced skills industrial classifications to develop, advanced competencies need to be adopted, scope of practice including job specifications carefully defined and organisational policies and procedures designed to support the role in each organisation and worksite. To date insufficient research literature exists about the successful implementation of advanced EN roles and how they are best supported by organisations.

The concept of advanced practice is predominantly portrayed in the international literature as the domain

of registered nurses (Fagerstrom and Glasberg 2011; Por 2008; Mantzoukas and Watkinson 2006; Bryant-Lukosius and DiCenso 2004), particularly Nurse Practitioners and Clinical Nurse Specialists (Newhouse et al 2011). While it is difficult to articulate succinctly what constitutes advancing practice by defining qualities, attributes and domains (Por 2008) the challenge is to develop management strategies that enhance the clarity of the EN with advanced skills role at the local level.

Advanced competencies are necessary for EN positions with advanced skills because they assist in part to define scope of practice and inform the education sector on the curriculum design for professional development programs. Further, advanced competency domains for the contemporary EN with advanced skills address public need; clearly identify demand and expectations of the role; meet legislative requirements; and ensure consistency with other professional advanced competency standards, codes of ethics and conduct (Nursing and Midwifery Board Australia 2007; Bryant-Lukosius and DiCenso 2004). Alone however, competency standards for advanced EN practice are insufficient to comprehensively define the EN with advanced skills role. It is noted that with the recent review and updating of the national EN competency standards by the Nursing and Midwifery Board Australia (2015) the term 'competency standards' has been replaced with 'practice standards'. It may be time to review the previously developed advanced EN competencies in light of these changes to practice standards. This would ensure national consistency for the development of the advanced EN role.

To avoid role ambiguity, it is important that role responsibilities are provided in detail and are specific to the advanced EN role. Requiring position descriptions to be scrutinised by a nursing leadership team prior to filling the position provides an opportunity to clarify specifically what an EN with advanced skills will be able to do. For example, increased knowledge and understanding of how research applies to nursing practice, must relate to the EN role. Supporting team leadership roles through educating and providing mentorship and preceptorship could be restricted to students in enrolled nursing programs, other less experienced ENs, and care workers. ENs with advanced skills should only contribute to the performance appraisal of ENs and care workers and not staff in other roles. They could also assist with the clinical assessment of students in enrolled nursing programs but not other programs. The expectation of role modelling should also be restricted to ENs, enrolled nursing students and care assistants. ENs at the advanced level would also be expected to actively engage with their profession and health care services through input in organisational policy development, and quality improvement initiatives (Por 2008; Blay and Donoghue 2007; Australian Nursing Federation 2005; Milson-Hawke and Higgins 2004) and should have rationales linked to the EN role.

Any role specification for the EN with advanced skills must support the registered nurse/midwife in the areas of patient-centred care and the principles of delegation, decision making and supervision. These provisions remain in accordance with EN practice as defined by the regulating authority in Australia (Nursing and Midwifery Board Australia 2007). As the role, by definition, requires supervision the organisation should develop policies and procedures that clearly indicate the nature of the supervision required for this level of EN.

Successful implementation of advanced EN roles depends on all areas of nursing accepting the opportunities and challenges these roles offer. Leadership from nursing management and registered nurses within health units is necessary if the opportunities this classification offers to enhance models of care is to be realised.

An ongoing evaluation of the implementation of ENs with advanced skills roles across Australia will be important to the roles' sustainability into the future. Health Departments and the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation have information resources available to assist health care organisations across Australia to develop parameters around the advanced role, however further work will be required to refine these resources in the light of any evaluation findings. Future evaluation findings must be widely available so that health units can learn from the experiences of others.

CONCLUSION

In Australia the EN with advanced skills has emerged in a number of jurisdictions within Australia as an industrial classification. For the role to meet its full potential, it must be supported by advanced EN competencies or practice standards, framed within an appropriate scope of practice and supported by workplace and organisational policies and procedures. The role also offers potential benefits for client care and career advancement. However further research and/or evaluation of these roles will be necessary before judgements about the effectiveness of the role can be determined.

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