

Letter to the Editor

Challenges in Graduate Nursing Education in Sri Lanka

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To the editor,

I have chosen to write to you on “Challenges in graduate nursing education in Sri Lanka”. I consider it timely for two reasons. Firstly, as a physiologist who vitalized the pioneer nursing degree programme in Sri Lanka for 15 years, I think it is time to take a look back. Today we stand at cross roads with regards to national policies on nursing education in Sri Lanka. As the founder Dean of the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, it is confusing and challenging when decisions regarding nursing education are not based on taking into account the pertinent facts. This is my second reason for penning this letter to the inaugural issue of your Journal.

I will structure this article by giving a summary of the history and the current status of graduate nursing education in Sri Lanka followed by discussing the challenges in nursing education which will be mainly addressed in two different perspectives. Firstly, the challenges pertaining to educating and training graduate nurses and secondly challenges faced by a registered nurse at workplace.

History and the current status of graduate nursing education in Sri Lanka

I am proud to say that the University of Sri Jayewardenepura pioneered graduate nursing education in Sri Lankan state universities commencing the B.Sc. (Honours) Degree in 2005 conducted through the Faculty of Medical Sciences [1]. The students were selected from the biology stream through the University Grants

Commission based on Z-score of GCE (A/L) examination. The very first B.Sc. Nursing Degree curriculum for state universities was developed by subject experts with the assistance of different relevant stakeholders. In doing so Ms. Sujatha Senevirathne, the founder Head of the Department of Nursing and Midwifery of the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences played a pivotal role. The Dean of the Faculty of Medical Sciences at that time, late Prof. M.T.M. Jiffry and Prof. Sirimalie Fernando gave leadership to commence and implement the nursing degree programme, which has been successfully conducted by the University of Sri Jayewardenepura for 15 years. Subsequently, Universities of Peradeniya, Ruhuna, Jaffna and Batticaloa started B.Sc. degree programmes in nursing awarding the degree through a faculty of medicine and health sciences or faculty of allied health sciences. The most recent to commence a graduate nursing programme is the University of Colombo which is unique in being the only nursing faculty in Sri Lanka.

The entry criteria for the nursing degree to all the universities are similar, although the numbers vary, with the latest Nursing Faculty in Colombo and the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences in the

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University of Ruhuna taking an annual intake of 100 while Peradeniya, Jaffna, Sri Jayewardenepura and Eastern University each admit 50 students per intake. As per current intakes, annually 375 students are admitted directly to state universities and another 75 students from the Ministry of Health (MoH) through lateral entry criteria giving a total of 450 nursing graduates completing each year [2].

The challenges pertaining to educating and training nursing graduates

There was a dearth of staff in academic departments of nursing due to lack of professional and academic qualifications required to be recruited to universities. Lack of experience as nurse practitioners of the newly qualified graduates was another issue. This problem is further compounded as there is no postgraduate school of nursing or health sciences for the potential Registered Nurses (RNs) to obtain postgraduate degrees which is essential to be recruited as senior lecturers. However due to the commitment and hard work of the nursing academics, they have maintained high professional standards and produced graduates from state universities who are now recruited to the MoH almost immediately after registration. Those academics have also acquired the relevant postgraduate qualifications overcoming many hardships while contributing to teaching and training of nursing graduates which is a remarkable achievement.

Nursing is a profession which is competency based. Competencies are acquired through hands on training and practice under supervision. The faculty has to certify that students possess core competencies over a wide range of nursing care including basic life support, critical care, trauma care, mental health care, elderly care and maternal & child care. In training and assessing these core competencies, lack of onsite trainers and clinical supervisors is a challenge. Even

when trainers are available, due to the heavy workload in their own wards or units, it takes an additional effort for the trainers or clinical supervisors to give the required attention to the graduate nursing students. In addition, there is no provision in the cadre of the universities or relevant departments to recruit clinical supervisors.

The alternative to overcome the above challenges is to allow the students to practice on simulators in a laboratory or a made up ward, theatre, intensive care unit or any special care setting. This is very resource intense in terms of the equipment, manikins and training of trainers. However, the students have the opportunity to practice at their own pace, during free time, without any adverse outcomes to real patients. Although it is a heavy investment to establish skills development laboratories, the returns will be much beneficial specially under the current COVID 19 pandemic situation where clinical training of nursing graduates in hospital settings is a challenge.

There are essential competencies in nursing practice that are difficult or almost impossible to acquire by simulated training. Professional communication with members of the health care team, patients and family members is difficult to learn in an artificial environment. Interacting with members of the health care team and enabling the nursing graduates to cope with confidence in a real clinical setting is another challenge faced in many educational institutions.

Discrepancies between rewards and recognition given to graduate nurses and those from the MoH and other private organisations pose another challenge. Currently the student nurses enrolled in to the nursing diploma programme are paid an allowance during their training by the MoH. They are also provided with accommodation and other facilities during the training period [3]. In

contrast, the nursing students of state universities have to spend for their own accommodation, transport, uniforms and are not paid an allowance during the training period.

It is observed that the average Z scores of the students taking to nursing after the GCE advanced level is low compared to previous years. Non-payment of an allowance during the training and the duration of the study programme could be possible reasons for eligible students not to opt for B.Sc. Nursing degree offered by the universities. Nursing is a profession which requires critical thinking, clinical reasoning, independent decision making, leadership qualities and negotiating skills in addition to emotional intelligence. Molding the students to professionals with such attributes within time and human resource constraints is in itself challenging. It is equally or more challenging to give adequate mentorship or preceptorship to the graduates. If resources are available, providing phased out mentorship to graduates will enhance the coping strategies and their abilities to function as independent nurses with confidence.

Challenges in the workplace as a registered nurse

With the ever changing landscape of the health care needs, health care delivery system and management systems, the roles and responsibilities of a nurse too will change. Facing this change is a challenge to the RNs and the trainers. In Sri Lanka too with the changing disease patterns from communicable to non-communicable diseases, the rising incidence of malignancies and increase in the elderly population, road traffic accidents being very high, the need for rehabilitation and community nursing care becomes crucial and an emerging need [4]. In this scenario, to prepare the newly graduated RNs to provide continuum of care or holistic care is a challenge.

Lack of reliable information on supply and demand of nurses is a problem faced by educators and RNs. The MoH and the different major care giving institutions should provide reliable and updated statistics on the requirement for nurses in different settings of varied responsibilities. This information will enable the educators to revamp the curricula and training to suit the demands of the country.

Anomalies in ranking and salary structure of graduate nurses are also challenges faced by both educators and the nursing graduates. In addition to the six state universities which offer a four year B.Sc. Nursing (Honours) degree programme, the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University also offers an Honours degree in nursing. The Open University of Sri Lanka is the pioneer in offering a B.Sc. degree for practicing nurses as a top up degree which was started in 1994 [5]. In addition to these universities, there are private institutions which offer B.Sc. in Nursing. Graduates from foreign universities also join the work force. However, there is no clear policy as to how all these graduates are ranked when absorbed into government institutions for employment. This is a matter to be taken up by the Nursing Council of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, lack of opportunities for upward mobility and career advancement mechanisms to those serving in the MoH is another challenge which may result in graduate nurses moving overseas or leaving to take up other positions leading to attrition.

In this letter, I have addressed some challenges in nursing education pertaining to teaching and training of nursing graduates and in retaining RNs in the relevant workplace. To summarize, firstly those related to teaching and training include dearth of qualified professional academics and clinical trainers and lack of training settings to acquire competencies which will also enhance other attributes. Lack of rewards, and facilities available for graduated

nurses compared to other student nurses is also a challenge. Secondly, to produce graduates who can cope with changing demands and trends in health care delivery and its management, lack of reliable information on demand, supply and specific requirements, anomalies in ranking methods, lack of opportunities for career mobility and career advancement are the challenges encountered after graduation. My intention was to discuss the challenges faced in graduate nursing education in Sri Lanka with the hope of streamlining and improving the standards of this noble profession. I hope I have given some insights so that relevant professional bodies like Nursing Council, Sri Lanka Nurses Association, Graduate Nurses Foundation of Sri Lanka, University Grants Commission and the MoH can deliberate on these and offer solutions to at least some of them in the future. A revisit to graduate nursing education is imperative based on the above challenges before replacing the higher diploma conducted by the schools of nursing with a nursing degree or opening new nursing degree awarding institutions.

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