Academic-clinical partnership adds perioperative component to BSN curriculum

Including AORN’s PeriOp 101 curriculum in a bachelor of science (BSN) curriculum has allowed the University of St Thomas in Houston to break new ground in nurse education. Launched in May 2012, the program—a partnership between AORN, the University of St Thomas School of Nursing (UST), and Harris Health System—exposes student nurses to the OR clinical setting and allows them to work with OR staff nurse preceptors.

“Only one other nursing school in the country that we know of requires every nursing student to rotate through the perioperative area,” says Ann C. From, MSN, RN, CNOR, clinical nurse educator, Ben Taub General Hospital, Houston. “A few have a perioperative elective, but this program is truly an innovation.”

Harris Health System consists of Ben Taub General Hospital, a Level I trauma center with 586 licensed acute care beds, and Lyndon B. Johnson General Hospital, an acute care hospital with 328 licensed beds and a Level III trauma center. Both are teaching hospitals for medical schools and nursing schools.

The preceptor component of the program equips nurses with the skills needed to instruct, coach, and evaluate their students. Preceptors are advised by clinical faculty—expert nurses with advanced education and faculty qualifications.

Birth of an idea

UST reopened in 2012 after being closed for several years. Poldi Tschirch, PhD, RN, BC, was hired as dean, and discussions between Tschirch and Harris Health System’s Sharon Land, MBA, RN, NE-BC, CNOR, administrative director for perioperative services, were the catalyst for deciding to make perioperative nursing a required element of the new BSN program.

“The directors of nursing for the operating room and pre- and postanesthesia units for our two hospitals, as well as the perioperative nurse educators, were involved from the beginning,” From told OR Manager. Tschirch and Land introduced staff nurses to the concept at an OR staff in-service, and volunteers stepped forward to be preceptors for the students.

Tschirch drew up the budget and applied for a grant, which covered the cost of the
faculty person to develop and administer the preceptor education program. This was developed simultaneously as the BSN program was being developed and approved, From explains.

**Program structure**
The nurse preceptor program includes the following criteria: assessing the needs of the learner, creating an environment for learning, teaching and evaluating psychomotor skills, and giving feedback and evaluation. These four online modules take about an hour each to complete.

In addition, preceptors and clinical faculty engage in some role playing during two 8-hour workshops to help preceptors learn how to guide students and provide performance feedback, From says.

The clinical instructor assigns students to preceptors, and students work side by side with the preceptors, caring for all of the preceptor’s assigned patients for a given shift. Clinical instructors are responsible for ensuring a positive learning environment, support of students, and safety of patient care.

“We chose 8 of the 25 PeriOp 101 modules for the UST students to complete before coming to clinicals,” From says. Those modules are:

- Introduction to Perioperative Nursing
- The Surgical Environment
- Aseptic Technique
- Perioperative Assessment
- Safety in the Surgical Suite
- Scrubbing, Gowning, and Gloving
- Positioning the Patient
- Perianesthesia Nursing.

The integrated BSN program includes 2 years of prerequisites and 2 years of the nursing program (including two summer semesters). Halfway through the program, students choose where to go for their summer externship, and in their final semester, they choose their clinical specialty area.

“Nursing students are exposed to most of the procedures that we do—orthopedic, general, ENT, oral, gynecologic, genitourinary, plastic, and eye surgery,” From says. Because Ben Taub is a Level I trauma center, she notes, students are exposed to trauma cases whenever possible. Students spend 3 full days in the OR and 1 day each in the preoperative holding area, postanesthesia care unit (PACU), and gastrointestinal endoscopy unit.

“We have 20 to 25 preceptors, three to four clinical instructors, and 30 to 40 students per class. A new class starts every June,” says From.

**Measures of success**
Responses to a preceptor survey were largely positive: Two-thirds of respondents (67%) said they felt they had benefited professionally from being a preceptor and were interested in precepting in the future. All respondents agreed that UST faculty had provided adequate support to their preceptors.

An OR skills lab at a nearby community college was added to the BSN program in 2013, From says. New nursing students are walked through this mock OR, which contains a mannequin “patient” that is transported from the mock preoperative area, to the mock OR, and to the mock PACU.

“We talk them through each area, important safety features, and the role of the nurse,” From explains. “This simulation of what they will see and do in the real hospital perioperative suite seems to greatly reduce their anxiety and give them a head start on what will go on in their clinical rotations.”
A great opportunity

In the final semester of nursing school, it would be beneficial to revisit the students and assess their interest in OR and PACU nursing specialties as a career choice, From suggests. Those who are interested could be counseled on the best way to present themselves as candidates.

“We are accustomed to having students of many disciplines taught here. The leadership is well aware of the nursing shortage, especially the further shortage of OR nurses, so [implementing this program] was a ‘no-brainer’ for us,” From says.

“Nursing students are typically not exposed to the OR and the PACU,” she notes. “Perioperative nursing staff are eager to turn around the misconception that OR and PACU nursing is not open to new graduate nurses. In fact, we have found that hiring new graduates yields excellent nurses who are loyal to the institution for many years.”

She says three nurses from the first graduating class were hired at Harris Health System in the perioperative areas.

The time and resources required for this program are well worth the investment in educating the next generation of nurses, From says. “Our facilities are situated within a highly competitive job market, The Texas Medical Center, so we welcomed the opportunity. The partnership between our facilities and the UST School of Nursing has been overwhelmingly positive for all involved.”

For others who may want to develop a program like this, From advises getting buy-in from the whole OR staff and management: “It takes a lot of resources, and it won’t be a good experience for anyone if people aren’t on board.”

—Elizabeth Wood

Reference