New perioperative immersion clinical steadily spreading its wings

A perioperative immersion clinical for nurses pursuing a bachelor of science degree has gotten off to a good start in Wisconsin. Launched in 2012, the program matches students with preceptors during the final semester of their senior year. Students complete 252 clinical hours and the entire AORN Peri-Op 101 curriculum, which positions them to graduate with more comprehensive OR education and experience than students coming from more traditional programs, says Sharon Chappy, PhD, RN, CNOR, post-licensure programs director at the University of Wisconsin (UW) Oshkosh.

The catalyst for the program was an idea for succession planning at Theda Clark Medical Center, Neenah, Wisconsin. Several nurses were retiring, and some of newer nurses hired tended to leave the OR after spending 3 or 4 months in orientation. Theda Clark leaders approached Chappy about having nursing students complete a clinical rotation in the OR as part of their senior-level clinical education. The program was structured by Chappy and Theda Clark’s director of clinical operations, Deborah Doyle, MSN, RN; OR nurse educator, Patricia Madigan, BSN, RN, CNOR; and OR manager, Laurie Conradt, BSN, RN, CNOR.

“We thought it would be great to have interested students complete clinicals in the OR at Theda Clark for the full 14 weeks with a preceptor,” Chappy says. “We also wanted them to complete PeriOp 101 to get the theoretical foundation in addition to the clinical piece.”

Chappy sought grant funding from a UW Oshkosh Provost’s Initiative Grant to pay for the PeriOp 101 course, and then the undergraduate program committee approved having students in specialty clinicals for 14 weeks, she explains.

“We made it a competitive process; students had to apply and participate in an interview with the OR leaders and the potential preceptors at Theda Clark, as well as faculty from UW Oshkosh. That match with the preceptor and the student was a key factor to the students’ success,” she notes.

The structure

The nursing program at UW Oshkosh includes two clinical courses that a student completes in medical-surgical settings during the senior year. The first clinical course lasts 10 weeks, followed by a 4-week clinical immersion program.

Madigan, Doyle, and Conradt typically identify experienced perioperative nurses at Theda Clark who are good preceptor candidates—usually they have precepted new orientees in the past or have precepted students during a 4-week immersion, Chappy explains. However, the semester-long time frame is lengthier than that of most preceptor-student responsibilities, so this program requires a lot of dedication.

“The preceptors had to volunteer; they weren’t appointed,” Chappy says. “Preceptors must have a bachelor’s degree, but equally important, they must want to do it. One of our preceptors was finishing her PhD in nursing, and another was active in an MSN adult nurse practitioner program.”

Just one to two students per year are selected to complete clinical rotations in the
OR. Each student has a primary preceptor and a secondary preceptor, Chappy notes, because some preceptors work 12-hour shifts, so at times a secondary preceptor is needed to ensure students can complete clinicals on days that fit with their academic schedules.

Madigan took the lead on developing the clinical schedule, modeling it on how a new nurse would be oriented to the OR. “Students are required to work two 6-hour shifts per week during the first 10 weeks because we wanted them to be in the OR more than 1 day per week,” Chappy says. “In the last 4 weeks, they complete 32 hours per week, working the preceptor’s schedule and even taking call and coming in for emergencies.”

Madigan also developed the schedule of which modules of PeriOp 101 the students would complete and when. “The students understood that the work on PeriOp 101 would be over and above their clinical hours, but they were excited about learning the theory behind what they were doing. They weren’t just learning from a preceptor,” Chappy notes. During the first 10 weeks of the semester, students are also taking other senior-level courses, she adds.

The outcomes

Theda Clark is a regional trauma center, so students were exposed to a variety of neurologic, orthopedic, and other surgical procedures as well as organ harvesting. Many OR experiences for student nurses are observational, but in this clinical immersion, students learned beginning circulating nurse responsibilities that included patient skin prepping, preparing and opening cases, conducting time-outs, doing preoperative interviews and assessments, and participating in handoff communication.

“By the end of the semester, the preceptors were observing the students working as circulating nurses. It was very rewarding,” Chappy says.

“The students learned so many things that aren’t necessarily related to perioperative nursing. For example, their concept of sterile technique is phenomenal compared to what they would have learned elsewhere,” she says. Similarly, they learned advocacy and interprofessional collaboration. “They felt like they were part of the team rather than student nurses. These students seemed to have a leg up in communication skills with nurses and physicians compared to those in more traditional clinical training, with eight students per instructor.” Students are required to attend one AORN meeting or event during the semester, thereby also learning the value of membership in the professional organization.

Because students had to apply for this program, the OR staff knew they really wanted to be there. “Most of the time, the students worked well over the required 12 hours per week in the first 10 weeks because they wanted to follow through to the end of the case,” Chappy notes.

“So many times as a seasoned perioperative nurse, you don’t think about what you’re doing and why you’re doing it, because you’re so good at it,” she says. Having to answer students’ questions, however, sometimes made the staff look for information and consider the evidence on which policies and procedures are based. The OR staff said they felt invigorated by having the students there, according to Chappy.

Every graduating student completed PeriOp 101 and passed the final exam. Some were hired at Theda Clark, and some went to other facilities because typically openings at Theda Clark were filled by students who had completed the immersion clinical. Still others, Chappy says, realized that the OR was not for them, and that was a great learning experience. Even these students still benefited from the relationship with the preceptor and the depth of learning that occurs during such a rotation.
The future

The program is working so well that changes haven’t been needed, Chappy says—but she does have a wish list. “One thing I would change would be access to PeriOp 101. I would like to have it on a UW Oshkosh server, but we can’t afford it,” she says. Students at Theda Clark were able to access the course through Theda Clark’s server so they could work on the modules at home, she notes. But in other facilities, students had to complete the modules at the healthcare facility. That was more difficult for them.

“The program has grown in popularity, and I wish we had more spots,” she adds. “I wish every hospital in our area could take a student in their OR every semester.”

The emergency room, rehabilitation/intermediate neuro unit, and ICU at Theda Clark have adopted this program, Chappy notes. Aurora Bay Care in Green Bay, Mercy Medical Center in Oshkosh, and Appleton Medical Center in Appleton, Wisconsin, have also participated in the OR clinicals, and other facilities in the state are expressing interest.

“For hospitals that anticipate having OR openings in the future, I would encourage them to contact a local school of nursing and try to do a program like this. Schools of nursing are always looking for excellent clinical opportunities for their students. Students can be a burden, but when they are on a unit for 14 weeks, they become helpful and productive,” Chappy says.

“New orientees to the OR typically aren’t new graduates because often times OR staff are afraid to hire new graduates,” she adds. However, the students who were hired after completing this program typically came off of orientation 3 to 4 months early compared with a new orientee, saving facilities anywhere from $16,000 to $25,000 in orientation costs. ✴

—Elizabeth Wood

Reference