

Nursing students on the unit: what's your role?

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Abstract:

You arrive on your nursing unit at the beginning of your shift and notice nursing students talking softly among themselves. Checking the assignment board, you see that a student is assigned to one of your patients.

Vivid memories of your days as a nursing student on a busy medical-surgical unit come flooding back. You recall Linda, the RN who welcomed you with a warm smile and introduced you to your patient. That initial touch instilled a sense of confidence that you really needed that day. Linda made a point to talk to you throughout the day and even invited you to observe a bedside procedure. Her professionalism and compassion for her patient left such a positive impression that even today you find yourself emulating her.

Then, you remember another day during nursing school that was completely different. When you tried to introduce yourself to the nurse assigned to your patient, she cut you off mid-sentence. While giving you a report on your patient, she rushed through the details without making eye contact. But the worst moment came when you were fumbling nervously with a BP cuff. "Haven't you learned how to take a BP yet? Here, let me do it," the nurse said brusquely. You controlled your emotions at the time, but all the way home you wondered whether nursing was the right choice for you.

But you did stay in nursing—and vowed you'd never treat a nursing student that way if you were ever lucky enough to have one assigned to you. Modeling Linda's behavior, you welcome the student with a warm smile. This article explores what else you can do to make sure the student has a positive experience on your unit.

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Modeling Linda's behavior, you welcome the student with a warm smile. This article explores what else you can do to make sure the student has a positive experience on your unit. (See Rewards of mentoring.)

Friendly welcome

One of the first steps is to greet students warmly. They've probably been instructed to introduce themselves to the nurses but may be afraid to interrupt. By smiling and making eye contact with students, you give them an opportunity to speak. If you're busy at that moment, let the students know approximately when you'll be free to talk and discuss your patient. Students can make good use of the time by collecting data about their patient or looking up unfamiliar medications.

Include students during report, even if it means taking a little extra time. Students may feel too intimidated to ask questions when nurses don't include them or rush the report.

Ask students whether they have any questions. Nurses on specialized units may use terms, phrases, or abbreviations that are specific to that unit but unfamiliar to students.

Students' clinical instructors will tell you their place in the program. Students who are in the first few semesters will have a different focus than senior-level nursing students. For example, first-year students generally focus on basic skills, such as taking vital signs, whereas senior-level students may focus on leadership skills.

Share your knowledge

When time allows, talk to students about common diseases seen in patients on your unit. Most students are eager to learn from an experienced nurse. They want to take the broad knowledge they've been mastering in the classroom and apply it to clinical practice. Discussing real-life situations with students in the clinical setting helps bring the words from the textbook to life.

Be sure to model professional behaviors for nursing students, including respect for patient privacy laws and cultural competence.

Developing skills

Students are usually eager to demonstrate newly learned skills. Talk to their clinical instructor to find out what type of clinical experiences you may be able to help arrange for the students, such as sterile dressing changes or inserting nasogastric tubes. Some procedures, such as administering blood products, must be performed by a licensed nurse, so make sure you're familiar with your facility's policy and procedures. Remember that the clinical instructor should be present when procedures are performed by students.

A nursing intervention you may think of as mundane, such as patient teaching, may be an area where the student hasn't had any experience. Remember to invite students to observe you in various situations, such as reviewing discharge instructions.

Inquisitive minds

Finally, ask students questions related to patient care and give them a chance to think critically. Brammer studied the complex role of staff nurses working with nursing students and found that questioning students was perceived as a positive experience when questions promoted critical thinking and clinical reasoning.¹

Keep in mind that challenging questions may be perceived as confrontational to nursing students. To avoid intimidating them and encourage critical thinking, ask students questions such as these:

- "How would you handle it if...?"
- "What common signs and symptoms occur with...?"

For example, suppose you and a student are caring for a patient who was admitted with a deep vein thrombosis (DVT). The nurse on the previous shift reports that the patient has a heparin drip and is to receive the first dose of warfarin this evening. You could ask your student:

- "Is it safe for us to administer these two types of anticoagulants at the same time?"
- "What adverse reactions should we monitor for when caring for patients taking anticoagulant medications?"
- "What complications should we monitor for in a patient with a DVT and what clinical manifestations are associated with those complications?"

These questions prompt the student to recognize the importance of concepts such as safe medication administration. By using the word we instead of you when asking questions, you'll promote a sense of teamwork and collaboration.

Offer a warm greeting, include students in the daily routine, treat them with respect, and model professional behavior. Someday in the future, the students will pass along these positive traits to the next generation of nurses.

Rewards of mentoring

In the clinical setting, staff nurses serve as role models, mentors, and preceptors. They expose nursing students to the realities of nursing and add to the student's ability to apply theory to practice.² These exceptional members of the profession can reap rewards such as recruiting future nurses and developing lasting relationships. Many RNs value students' enthusiasm and their eagerness to learn. Working with nursing students can bring about a sense of job satisfaction and helps elevate the profession.

One nurse recently said, "Working with nursing students gives me more confidence. I didn't realize how much I knew about nursing until I was able to answer the students' questions."

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